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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE THIRTEENTH TREE

BY

KAREN J. GRANT

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING 1991

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Date: April 26, 1991

"Ah! My Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,
...And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken around me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

(from Bedivere's speech in Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur", Idylls of the King)

"Queen Morgan le Fay...I know your false treason, and through all places where that I ride men shall know of your false treason..."
(Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur)

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ENTITLED THE THIRTEENTH TREE

SUBMITTED BY KAREN J. GRANT

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

Prof. Rudy Wiebe

Muriel A. Whitaker

Date: April 22, 1991

Dedication

To those who always expected my renewal and return. And most especially to the one who would not let me journey through the Dark Half alone.

ABSTRACT

This novel retells the King Arthur myth by taking the most familiar elements of the story and placing them in opposition to traditional representations. The story begins with Arthur's death and reflects back on events between Morgan and Arthur in an attempt to explain why Arthur chooses to go to Morgan at his death despite their enmity. Morgan becomes the protagonist, not the antagonist. Merlin is behind all evil machinations. And Arthur is self-inflated and incompetent. Over all, the female characters supplant the male ones in the foreground of the action, and spiritual quest replaces heroic journey.

The purpose of the retelling is to use mythic patterns to explore the quest for the Divine and the absolute Truth. Two journeyers travelling separate roads, one pagan and the other Christian, emphasize the universality of this desire by each finding the source of Truth. The novel's circular structure underscores this movement of journeying in opposite directions only to arrive at the same place. By using the traditional elements of the myth in a contrary way, the story emphasizes the inability of the temporal world to provide a reliable truth. Three narrators, each with slightly different

interpretations of the events, also illustrate the limitations of human perception. Ultimately, human words are insufficient to translate the Truth, but are the means by which the journey can begin.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Robert Graves, The White Goddess for the idea of the tree alphabet; and to Sir Ifor Williams, The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry for the sections of poetry attributed to the bard Taliesin, which appear on page 7 and again on the final page of this book. Acknowledgement must also go to Mary Stewart, The Crystal Cave, for her inventive interpretation of Merlin's parentage. The story of Arthur and Morgan as it is told here has been adapted from various ancient accounts, most significantly from Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Histories of the Kings of Britain, with a good deal of latitude and respect.

Special acknowledgement and thanks goes to R. Wiebe and M.A. Whitaker, whose belief and encouragement, example and instruction brought seed to fruit.

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Prologue

I was with them when their moon was new   I was with them
when the sun saw their grief   I was with them when the
earth swallowed their names   I was the water they drank
I was the dream they dreamt   I was their way of doing
and undoing   in their beginning   the Word was mine
I am Taliesin

Bruised and torn, the roses yielded a perfume which flourished in the morning air. So strong was the effusion that a countryside covered in blossoms found voice in the essence of a few fallen heads; yet those within it, passengers who struggled to lift a body on board the ferry, no longer noticed the petals beneath their feet, nor the generous scent. And though beyond their steps the month of Oak was fully on the land, creating a lush euphony of growth and rebirth, they could only hear the life which ebbed from the man cradled in Morgan's lap.

With the help of the ferryman, the four women managed to ease him down between the seats to lie on the petals. Morgan joined him there in that narrow space and gently brushed her brother's hair away from the bandage around his forehead. The blood on the hastily torn piece of cloth had dried, but he was not healing, she could see. The wound had gone deep inside. The gentleness of her regard for him, the soft sun, the traditional welcome of the flowers, all were lost in his silent eyes.

It had been a long time since she had last looked into those eyes.

A sudden breeze fluttered through the petals, lifting, animating them, turning them into soundless yellow butterflies around his head. Morgan brushed the stray ones from her lap, from his hair; and found among his first, few grey strands all that time, with its pain and betrayal, in her hands.

Could she look at it?

She pulled at a single petal, discovering its browning tip and the fragrance which still clung to it, and then rubbed it between her nose and mouth. It soothed her and brought her back a little to this glistening day, to the vibrant hush of a summer morning. Some places, she recalled, would still celebrate this morning: the summer solstice, Oak King Day. In the ancient way, each of those villages would choose a boy to be Oak King. Crowned with wild flowers, draped in a cloak the colour of new leaves, he would be paraded from house to house on a white steed, people gathering to run and dance and laugh and sing beside him, because his was the beauty and the strength of the growing season, the promise of continuance.

And here, she shivered, letting the flower fall, the real

King of the Britons lay shrouded in primroses.

Behind Morgan at the bow of the small boat, the ferryman solemnly awaited her signal while the three other women, wraith-like in their white wool robes, sat anxiously on the seats beside her.

Morgan had forgotten any of them were there, had once more lost the sense of anything save the slight breath left in his chest.

"Arthur," Morgan's words whispered around her fingertips, along the curve of his cheek, stroking, soothing. "How many times I said your name aloud so that I could have part of you here with me, to make you real and not," her voice broke, "lost." Then, taking his hand, unaware that her voice had risen, "Why did you wait so long?"

"We rode as hard as we could, Lady Morgan."

Startled from the memories that were uncurling inside her, Morgan looked up at the man who remained on shore. Standing there amidst the forest, which tumbled thick and dark to the water's edge, trembling in the emerald light, Bedwyr waited, leaf shadows dancing across wan features, the sodden filth of battle still clinging to his tunic and cuirass. Her brother's man.

"He shouldn't have been moved, I know," he continued. "But he insisted, demanded that I bring him here. To you."

His expression tightened. Was it tiredness, she wondered? No.

"We...we couldn't get here any faster."

Morgan nodded slightly and though she could sense the man's animosity towards her, she found him admirable. He really had brought his King here as quickly as possible.

"There is none more loyal than you, Bedwyr," she began gently, "a good Christian bringing his Christian King to this place, unfalteringly, without knowing why he asked this of you."

Mud clung to his hair and beard, his face smeared by sweat and tears. "He said that you'd take him to Avalon and heal him."

She looked back down at her brother, his face slack, hollow, the chill gray of death lurking. "That is what he said?" Morgan sighed. She had hoped Arthur had come to her for reasons other than desperation and fear. Surely he had known this wound of his was fatal, that coming here only for the sake of it was futile? " Bedwyr, I can't heal him. Even if all the gods -- "

"There is only *one* God, Lady Morgan. And by His Grace we arrived here with the King still alive."

She felt a flash of the old anger. The aggressiveness of Christians had always galled her. But just as quickly the feeling turned to sympathy for Bedwyr, so long the brave and indomitable warrior at Arthur's side. His whole life had been dedicated to brandishing his sword for the sake of his King's life. Now he was motionless, the powerful sinews of his arms emptied out into grief-clenched fists.

"Well then," she answered softly, " I would suggest you ask Him for more help. There is nothing in the knowledge my Goddess has given me that can cure this kind of injury."

"But he said..."

"What did he say? Exactly, Bedwyr." The question was sharper then she had intended, but she had to know.

The warrior shrugged weakly. "That the only way he would be made whole again was if I brought him to you."

At this, Morgan smiled. Taking her brother's hand, she held on tightly. "Ah, well, that is quite different."

"Different? What do you mean? You're still famous for your healing powers, despite everything. That's what he meant."

Kindly, because she knew this loyal, pious man would not want to believe it, she explained. "You are correct. Your god...*his* god did see him safely here. But not to be healed. It was my brother's wish, and apparently his god's, that he come here to die."

"No!" Bedwyr raised one fist.

What was he so violently declaiming? The death, or the betrayal? In answer to the desperate questioning in the man's eyes, she shook her head and placed her brother's hand down softly on his chest. "To die, Bedwyr. In peace." She could not fully make sense of it either, but she knew it was true.

Softly at first, and then with rising strength, Bedwyr acknowledged the truth too with words solemn, sacred, soothing in their rise and fall.

For the briefest of moments, no more than the silver flash of a water beetle against the foam, Arthur's eyes focussed on Morgan.

She bent forward and kissed his mouth. "Dear brother, why here...with me...after all this time and all our differences?"

The shrill call of the red kite answered her, its fork-tailed shadow dancing on the water. Leaves whispered. Water lapped at wood. And Arthur's breath left: a rattling surrender. Sharply, the tears came and Morgan pulled her brother close, burying her face in his neck. Without a word, the ferryman began to pole away from the shore, towards the island, to Avalon.

Bedwyr's prayer grew fainter across the water, through the newly risen wind. Dimly Morgan heard its strongest sounds, knew it was meant to help Arthur on his journey to the Otherworld. And she wished for one of the old songs to speed him.

Suddenly, loudly a rider broke through the trees.

"Lady Morgan! Wait!"

On the shore, steed rearing, the rider called again. "Morganna!"

The voice, foggy through her pain, made her shake her head unrecognizingly. Then, in the old way, the rider began to chant. With a growing clarity Morgan heard the song skim across the waves.

harm has befallen an island   splendid in song
strife all around

The gods had heard her; they had brought Taliesin!

dragonlike hero   rightful lord in Britain
the prince has perished   most high chieftain
the earth covers him

Morgan smiled, cradling her brother, rocking slowly as understanding flooded her. It was right that Taliesin should have one more song for Arthur. She motioned to the ferryman and they started back for one more passenger.

Birch

Tree of Nascence

cloaked in whispering oak   wet with moonlight we recite
the symbols of our tongue   unwritten   unlike
roman signs   yet they everywhere exist   silent on stone
they sing through the trees   and speak   through the
moving moon   living   always   at the centre of our life
marking the eternal circle   of light and dark's
dominion

first   made in birch   tree of nascence   manifest in
the month when   the sun first signals return
second   made in rowan   tree of summoning   manifest in
the month when   the sleeping earth stirs
third   made in ash   tree of regeneration   manifest in
the month when   waters wash the land
fourth   made in alder   tree of battle   manifest in
the month when   daylight equals dark
fifth   made in willow   tree of divination   manifest in
the month when   promise saturates the soil
sixth   made in hawthorn   tree of abstinence   manifest
in the month when   all wait
seventh   made in oak   tree of continuance   manifest
in the month when   day's light is longest

eighth made in holly tree of increase manifest in
the month when life is lush
ninth made in hazel tree of wisdom manifest in
the month when fruit is full
tenth made in bramble tree of emotion manifest in
the month when darkness balances day
eleventh made in ivy tree of revelry manifest in
the month when night drinks deep
twelfth made in dwarf elder tree of confirmed power
manifest in the month when reaping recalls sowing
thirteenth made in elder tree of doom manifest
in the month when the fullest night forshadows
the coming sun

Morgan had made a friend of a raven. Every morning she would fill her pudgy fists with corn from the small bowl of grain her mother let her keep aside and fling it with all the force her four-year-old's arms could muster in the direction of the glossy black bird, which would always be waiting, perched atop the thatched roof of the house closest to the main hall. Then it would hop, not fly, down to the dry earth and gobble up the offering, one black bead eye aimed at Morgan, bristled bill snapping, snapping. After only a few mornings it stopped being cautious and no longer kept its wings spread as it approached.

And Morgan, fascinated with the large bird, almost as tall as she, moved closer each time, eager to touch feathers that looked like metal. Although it never let her get that close, it would call to her, mimicking the strangest things. Croaks, rattles, pops, even bubbling, knocking and squeaking came out of its marvelous bill, making Morgan giggle with delight.

The other children in the Caer told her that a raven was a bad omen, and when she asked her father's druid about it he said the raven was the bird of battle and destruction; with its cries and its flight it told of a coming loss. She should watch the bird carefully, he said, because it could tell her exactly what she would lose and though she could not avoid the fate it predicted, it was a great gift to be allowed such foresight.

What he said made Morgan afraid. But her mother said that having the bird as a friend meant the goddess Modron was watching over her, because the raven was the form She took in battle. Nothing bad could happen to Morgan if she had the fierce protection of the Great Mother Modron.

Morgan liked to think that under those metal black feathers, behind those bright black eyes was the strongest, wisest, bravest woman of all, one who could fight anyone or anything. Maybe Modron had come to grant Morgan's wish, to snap in two, with that sharp, sharp beak, the ones who had killed Morgan's father. After all, the raven came after her father had led his warriors into battle and bravely crossed to Annwn, the Otherworld. Another loss, worse than that of her strong, warm, laughing father, Morgan could not imagine.

They had to leave so much behind. The morning when they were finally ready to leave, when the last horse was packed and the last bundle tied, Morgan ran around the main hall, certain that everything of hers had been forgotten. Her mother was going to marry the High Chieftain and so they must leave Caer Tintagel and go to live in Caer Leon. And the High Chieftain's druid had said that Morgan's sisters, Ilaine and Margawse, were old enough at thirteen and twelve to be married too. So they were going to other places even further away. Margawse was demanding that their mother, the servants, everyone make sure she had all she needed. She always wanted to be seen, but now she seemed desperate for the final moments of their attention. Morgan felt panicky and sick and empty. She dug through blankets and furs and dishes and pots, through jars and boxes and baskets. Only their clothes and trinkets had been packed. Hers too, she discovered without relief. Then she spied the bowl of corn which had been abandoned by the hearth. Grabbing as much as she could from it in her sticky hands, she ran out to find her friend.

The raven was waiting, sparkling eyes focussed on hers, beak tightly closed.

She brushed the grain from her palms.

"I, I have to go away."

Still poised on the thatch, the bird took no notice of the grain strewn in the grey dust.

"And I'll never come back." Her eyes stung and she wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

Black eyes glinted in the sun.

"I won't ever see you again. Nothing will ever be the same."

Morgan waited, hoping that if there was magic in her friend, she would see it now.

The raven stayed a raven.

Then, suddenly the bird swooped down, circled over her head, shadowing the sun, and flew off mimicking all her delight, giggling, giggling, taking her laughter with it.

sprung from a saxon dog   I   Taliesin   am the product of
his droppings   expelled   in the bloodless gratifications
of war   raised   a briton child no less   fostered like
any full blood   to a craft while yet my hands were small
too small   to hold the sticks of glass   bird's eye
bright   sliced to shards   of sunset   sea   and sky
then wedded to bronze for bracelets brooches and pins
glass come from the homelands of my sire   from shadow
places caught against rhine waters   scraps   imported
along with earthenware from carthage and   the black sea
a scarlet needle   meant   to grace a circular clasp

sliced my finger   smearing red on red   I watched
wondering which blood the rhineland glass had drawn
its own   or its enemy's

From every house in Caer Leon the people came, bringing furs and food, letting their children sleep in their arms or run and play, settling outside the main hall of the Caer all the way back to the gates of the fortress, to wait, their voices a persistent rattle of fear and pessimism. Three nights later, their numbers were far less.

Inside the main hall, the weight of those three nights affected all but one. His words, his ways were as always, talismanic.

"She's of fostering age anyway. Even under normal circumstances you'd soon be arranging a suitable fosterage for her. And you have enough to concern yourself with now. Let me take care of it."

The druid's tone was so soothing, so practiced at instilling confidence and calm that it could lull any within hearing. But this time there were two his silken words could not touch: Uther, who had been insensible for three nights now, and his wife, Ygraine.

The High Chieftain, Uther, the Mighty Dragon, was dying. And those who had been admitted to his living quarters to watch the agony of life departing were taxed by the long vigil past endurance themselves. Only the druid seemed as vital and capable as when he first summoned them all. Now, as he spoke to Ygraine, the others, the three most trusted warriors in Uther's *teulu* , drew deeper breaths and gave one another reassuring smiles. Undoubtedly they thought that the druid could and would take care of things - everything. With Uther's death, the chance of them maintaining their positions in any succeeding council looked bleak: Uther had no heir. Unless the druid, as chief Advisor, could find a way to maintain the present administration, they would lose much if not all of their acquired wealth and power and quite possibly their lives. But they trusted this druid.

Something Ygraine did not.

Thin, wan, her beauty drained away in the months of her husband's illness, Ygraine stood, twisting at the delicate bracelet of gold wire she was wearing, gazing down at her husband, paler still, studying the pattern of his breath and the tremors of pain which shuddered through him as if in them she could interpret his final wish. There could be no other way - the illness had finally taken his power of speech, and now it was wringing the last, horribly small sounds from him.

Above his bed, bright banners of scarlet bearing his emblem of two golden dragons breathing out rays of starlight and fire fluttered a little with the morning breeze, like the sails on the ship that would take him to Annwn. And the sun fell in a small pool of gold, gilding the straw covered floor, weighting down the furs which covered him. Past the open window the fire of Autumn consumed the land in crimson and orange, and thickened the air with a sweet dust. Yet Uther would have seen no splendour in these, his final visions of life. He would have cursed them for not being the glories of the battlefield.

When his strength first faltered, Uther demanded that he be carried to the battlefield on a litter so that he could still command his warriors and defy his Saxon enemies. Instead, the sight of him gave his enemies strength, assuring them that they could now easily wrestle the land from his failing grasp. And he had railed against them from his small wooden bed.

Now, Uther could curse no more.

Even the excessive ministrations of his druid, who had monitored everything consumed by Uther throughout the progression of his illness, had done nothing to halt his affliction. If anyone had dared suspicion, they might have questioned the druid's attentions. But even Ygraine's distrust of the druid had not formed around the word poison.

"Morgan will need a protector," the druid continued, "to secure some kind of future for her..." Ygraine remained quiet, ignoring the insistent pulse of words behind her.

"Ygraine." Long, bluish fingers lighted on her shoulder.

At his touch she turned and regarded him with barely disguised revulsion. "Merlin, can't this wait?"

A woman who acted on feelings more often than reason, Ygraine could not say precisely why she distrusted Merlin when no one else did. He was already, at only twenty-five and barely finished his druidic training, widely acclaimed for his foresight, his wisdom, and his ability to speak with the gods. Nearly everyone spoke of him with reverence, his charisma undeniable. Yet Ygraine never felt at ease around her husband's Advisor, didn't like the way he always seemed so exquisitely controlled.

"I'm only concerned for Morgan." He slipped his hand away and gave her a pacific smile.

"Don't you care that your uncle is lying here, dying, *now*?"

The druid looked perfectly horrified. "Of course I do."

"Well, it's all I can think about!"

That was not exactly true. Ygraine had been fretting for months over the future of her youngest child. Because of Uther's illness and the promise it brought of her own powerlessness should he die, she had been forced to face the results of her actions two years before when she chose to marry the High Chieftain. Morgan, Ygraine's favourite not simply because she was the last child to survive past her mother's womb but because she possessed a curious quiet that spurred Ygraine's protectiveness, had been, ironically, harmed the most by those actions.

"With his death much will be undone." Merlin stood companionably beside Ygraine, hands clasped, looking sadly down at his uncle. "Some things would be better prepared for now. I would not want to see Morgan's concerns forgotten in the panic." He looked at her pointedly.

The emphasis was not needed; his unsaid words,"like before", hung heavily enough in the room. Ygraine paled even as the men behind her shifted uncomfortably.

Morgan's father, Rica, Chieftain of the *cantref* of Dumnonia, had refused to acknowledge Uther's claim to supreme rule as High Chieftain over all the *cantrefs* in Britain and when, after his sudden death, his wife had surprisingly and quickly married his adversary, Dumnonia was torn apart by tribal wars. The battles over allegiances and territory eventually took all of Ygraine's lands and cattle and dispersed Rica's, and all the while Ygraine had remained steadfastly lost to the consequences. Uther's desire had enthralled her, she had given up everything to be with him, allowed him to swallow her whole. Now she had to acknowledge at least one result of her folly: Morgan had been left without an inheritance. At only six years old Morgan had a life without promise: noble blood that could no longer claim kinship with power, nor any wealth to buy it, nothing to make her either marriageable or independent.

Nor had Uther made any provision for Morgan. Inheritance being strictly defined by kinship, he was not required to, and it had never been in Uther's nature to be generous. Besides, even if he had, it probably would not be Morgan's for long. More uprisings would follow his death, more plots and deceits and theft.

Unless Merlin could do something.

"Give her to me."

Ygraine did not try to hide her distaste.

"Give her to me," the druid insisted, his tone silky. "Put her under my care. You can take her with you to your brother's, but what will that give her? He has his own family, does he not? I can find her a good fosterage."

"Children are fostered at eight, not six," Ygraine snapped, tears shining in the corners of her eyes.

Patient, ever patient, and still so calm, Merlin reminded her, "Ygraine, you know that many children are sent away at six..."

Ygraine shook her head angrily. "Children of herdsmen and others like them...who must learn a trade. Not the children of ruling families. They're sent away in order to learn strength and independence -"

She broke off suddenly, as if something had just settled on her, and looked down at her husband once more. Intent on Uther's wasted form, she began again to twist her bracelet.

On the far side of the room, seated on the straw covered floor, the men from Uther's *teulu* leaned together and whispered in low tones. Merlin hushed them with a look.

Then, with the stealth of a serpent, Merlin's words slipped into the quiet.

"Morgan is no one, any more."

A tremor visibly passed through Ygraine, but she remained silent and the druid continued.

"I have friends that will raise and teach her well. And I will provide her with enough to obtain a decent marriage. Something better than to a herdsman, I promise."

Now she turned on him. "Why?," she demanded. "Why would you do this?"

No one could have looked more hurt than he. "Because I care, Ygraine."

"About what ?"

Ygraine's challenge provoked shocked gasps from the men. But in Merlin all trace of emotion disappeared, and his response was as smooth as a knife's edge.

"You are obviously overworn with care," he said, beginning to walk slowly around her. "Too distraught to be able to think clearly." Behind her back he shared a concerned and knowing look with the other men. "Perhaps later you will be able..." He broke off with a helpless gesture, indicating he did not really believe there would be such a time.

The men of the *teulu* whispered in sad tones.

"No, Merlin."

For the first time Ygraine turned away from Uther's bedside and she began to pace around the large room, speaking with surprising determination.

"Now is the perfect time to tell you what I want to do with Morgan, because I have decided."

"Oh?" He turned to face her. "Just now?" Contempt seemed to flicker in his eyes, but only for a moment.

"No." She stopped, her back to him. Then she whirled around to confront him. "Yes. Just now, suddenly, I do know. And it's right. I can feel it."

She turned away from all of them, then, and walked over to the window, pausing to blink at the sun-filled day. When she spoke again it was still forcefully, yet more to herself than anyone.

"Strength and independence. I want her to have that. Morgan has neither wealth nor beauty... but where do they lead finally?" Ygraine shook her head sadly. "They are too easily lost, too easily mistaken as a guarantee."

She stared out at the other houses in the Caer. "Why is it, I wonder, that a woman is only granted the most transient things to base her life upon? Beauty, wealth, a marriage. Only those to equate her worth. How can they be the touchstone? They don't define her. They don't. Because if they did, she'd vanish with them."

A look of resignation drained the tension from her features and her eyes grew dark. "But she doesn't. She remains."

Now she drew back to them, to a room full of silent men.

"Morgan is fortunate, fortunate she does not have them, because she will have to centre her life on other things. And I'm going to make sure it's something that cannot change or be lost...something she can always return to for strength and surety."

For once Merlin looked genuinely impatient. "And what would that be?"

"You don't know? You of all people should know, druid."

"Your mind is a mystery to me, Ygraine."

Ignoring his gibe, Ygraine actually smiled. "I am going to send her to Avalon to become a bandrui."

At her announcement, rage filled his eyes, lighting them from behind, obliterating all colour and depth. As the anger swept through him, he struggled obviously with his rare discomposure, clenching his fists at his sides to stop the trembling.

"Surely *you're* not against a child entering one of the religious crafts, are you?" she challenged.

With a sharp jerk of his head, he signalled the other men. "Get out."

They began to protest, looking over at their dying chieftain. They had a right to be at his side, and the moment would come soon -

"GET OUT!"

The room emptied quickly and Merlin turned, white lipped, to Ygraine.

"What can you possibly think you are talking about? Philosophizing on what has *real* value, on true strength? Ha! You?" he snorted, shaking his head in disgust. "You are an insufferably dull-witted woman who has never considered anything past what may entertain you for the moment, who has no idea of and no interest in what it really takes to make your privileged world and yet who manages, through sheer idiocy and whim, to get in the way of greatness."

He moved menacingly close to her. "I will not allow you to undermine the lines of power again."

"What are you talking about?" Ygraine demanded, backing away from him. "I don't understand. We were discussing the future of a small child and her personal struggles, not the struggles of -- of -- "

Roughly, Merlin grasped her by the shoulders and shook her. "Understand this: You will do as I tell you from now on. Or I will make sure that -"

A scatching sound came from the other side of the room. Impossibly Uther had rolled onto his side and was scrabbling at the straw with one arm, trying to push himself up.

"Uther!" Ygraine wrenched herself free and ran to him, kneeling on the floor when she reached his bed to gather him into her arms.

His jaw worked, lips moved, soundlessly, determined to speak. And his hand reached, reached for something behind Ygraine.

Suddenly pale, Merlin took a few hesitant steps backwards.

"Uther, what is it? What?" Ygraine cried.

At that moment, one of the warriors who had been with them before burst into the room, his face flushed with urgency. "Excuse me, Sage, but I must inform you - " At the sight of his chieftain rallying, the warrior stopped, dumbfounded.

Without taking his eyes from Uther, Merlin motioned the man away.

The signal brought the man back to his task and instead of leaving he insisted, "Sage, I *must* tell you. We have just received desperate news. The Saxons are raiding along our eastern border. One, possibly two *trefs* may already be lost."

Slowly the fingers of Uther's outstretched hand curled like a drying leaf and he lapsed back heavily,

Instantly Merlin's attention left the sick bed and he asked brusquely, "Where are they now?"

"By all reports they'll reach the Severn river in a seven-night...easily. There's no one to stop them," he nodded in the direction of Uther's collapsed form, "and they know it."

"They know nothing." Merlin held up his hand for silence. Then, after only a few moments of thought he asked, "What about our spies? Are they still in place?"

Still at her husband's side, holding his limp fingers between hers, Ygraine watched the druid intently.

The warrior shrugged hopelessly. "We've heard from one..."

"One's enough. Let it out that there's fighting amongst ourselves. That there's rebellion already, even before his death. Make the Saxons think we're more than missing a war leader. We're torn apart, wounded and ready for the kill."

Merlin slapped the other man on the shoulder and smiled. "Don't look so worried. The Saxon raids are just what we needed."

Astonished, the man began to splutter a protest.

"To *rally* us." Merlin explained, still smiling. "Go and tell the rest of the teulu we must convene at once. And start recruiting a warband immediately from every tref still standing, free or bonded, I want men from every one of them." With the last order, Merlin walked calmly toward the door.

"But -- but," the man looked nervously over at Uther's quiet form, at the pale, tense face of Ygraine, "who will *lead* them, Sage?"

Every part of his body was fluid, relaxed, as he let go of the hide which covered the door and turned, almost with a flourish, casting only one brief glance at the bed before he announced, "Why, I will."

Quietly, so quietly, blood began to dribble out of

Uther's mouth.

my mother was clear water   lost to the eye when mingled
with a stain   I stood defined   beside my dark briton
brothers   light haired and light eyed   the image of
her violator

with steel-taloned cry   Esus   sorcerer-god   called me
    my fingers left their twisting of gold   I came to the
art   nine seasons of dark   nine seasons of light
    until my beard was thick and pointed   I learned the
songs of britain   learned their making   mine became
the coiling of voice   into patterns of past and future
    uniting   I sang for my masters   sang louder than
any   and I went to my patrons   the chieftains of
britain   golden haired and golden voiced

With no warriors present to raise their swords in farewell, no druid to sanctify the pit and light the way to Annwn, only old men and children left to bear him on the shields, and only one bard to sing a hollow, thin song of tribute, Uther was buried beneath the harvest soil.

Despite the forlorn and weary cast of the day, Ygraine behaved as if imbued with the tenacity of the gods. After the funeral, absently swiping at her tears, she hurried back to the tasks that had kept her up long into the previous night; she was determined that before anyone could return from the battlefield, she and Morgan would be gone - she to her brother's, and Morgan to Avalon. As she packed the final few things, the couple with whom she had arranged for Morgan to travel brought her daughter in to say goodbye.

The man and woman were older, frightened, and impatient to leave for their relatives in the *cantref* of Ceredigion, where they thought they would be safer from the Saxon threat.

Pushing Morgan forward, the woman said, "She says she's left something behind. Says you don't know so won't bring it with you when you come to see her off. We should be going soon, anyway. Now, if that's alright. The sun's not going to get any higher."

A square-faced, stocky child with hair like copper wool and moss green eyes that were set too close, Morgan was never immediately perceived as pretty or endearing. When frightened, she would only appear stubborn or petulant, never waifish nor fragile. So she was rarely indulged, except by her mother.

Ygraine politely asked the couple if they would wait outside and when they were gone, she knelt down to hold her daughter's face in her hands.

"Morganna, my dearest light." Softly she brushed some hair from the little girl's eyes. "Why are you frightened? You know I told you you're going to a wonderful place...where you'll be very happy. And you'll see me. I'll come for visits. All the time."

Ygraine pulled her now trembling child close, stroking her back, kissing her head. "My sweet baby," she whispered.

Then she held Morgan back a little by the shoulders. "Morgan, you know that when children get big like you, they go to live somewhere else for a while. Not as far away," Ygraine rubbed at her own tears yet again, "but they don't get to go to anywhere as wonderful as you do. So don't be sad. Or afraid."

Morgan protested with her body, trying to pull away. "But I don't have my --my--"

"Your what, baby?"

"My..." still locked in her mother's arms, Morgan looked desperately around the room.

"Baby." Ygraine took the child's chin and made her look at her mother. "Morgan, you haven't left anything behind. No, you haven't."

She sat on the straw-covered floor then, and cradled

Morgan in her lap.

"Baby, I want you to understand something. You have everything you need. You will always have everything you need...right here." She placed her hand on Morgan's chest and tapped on it. "Right in here, Morgan. Remember that. Whenever you think you've lost something, you look in here. That's where you'll find it. Always."

They held each other for a while, wrapped together as one. Then Ygraine made Morgan stand up.

"I love you, Morgan, and you must believe that you will see me soon. Now you be a good girl and a big girl and we'll say goodbye, just for now." She held a kiss to Morgan's forehead, and then, stiffly, unsteadily, she stood herself and went to call Morgan's escorts.

As Morgan was being led away, Ygraine called out once more, "Remember, Morgan, everything you need..." She touched her heart.

Morgan never saw her mother again.

Rowan

Tree of Summoning

thirteen generations waxed   and waned   as our domain
declined and all things briton   deemed barbarous under a
roman sun   were sent to shadow   impenetrable rome feared
not the gods of their vanquished   those insubstantial
vagaries of grove and marsh   hallowed metamorphics   who
knew all substance   immutable rome transformed them
shifting shape to seem   olympian   bright Belenos
became   illustrious Apollo   thundering Taranis turned
commanding Jove   mighty Maelwas made   potent Mars
only the priesthood   intermediaries between our spirit
and divine passion   discomposed impervious rome
so each art was diminished   emptied of power and
portent   druids   omnipotent counsellors who conversed with
god and warchief   were outlawed outcast   left only bleak
retreat in the remote halls of tribes recalcitrant
hidden and harmless like bears in the winter
our vates   reclusive fitful prophets   vanished   if
their voice refuted roman oracle   we bards   wordweavers
who   with divine inspiration entwined tapestries of
life's blood   deprived of deed and dream   were severed
from the british thread   bandrui   sequestered women who
from the goddesses gained   the secrets of the soil and all
its fruit   were reduced   pronounced womancraft and robbed

of their exclusivity   diluted in the swollen gleam   of
rome's Diana   though in those torpid days we despaired
our orb   the ever replenishing briton moon   would yet
shine thickly summoned and reclaimed when rome   in panting
retreat   their sun plucked out by visigoth blade   returned
us to our own sphere   once more   and we alone again in the
silvered
night   defenseless after four hundred   dependent years
found strength and order   in that ancient light

From the mainland, sometimes, one could see Avalon. When dapples of late sunlight seemed to form a path of stepping-stones across the water, and that same light coursed through the centre of the island's forest to illuminate the moss covered gates of the fortress, Avalon appeared. All at once it was there, distinquishable from its dank surroundings; a golden-green sanctuary, welcoming, waiting for one to simply walk up and enter its gates. More often, only the ferryman could tell where the worlds shifted, where the mist clung to timber walls and not gloom-ridden stands of oak and beech, or where the chill, metalic lake, whose shimmer swallowed the surrounding mountains whole, broke against the island's only landing.

But the people who had lived on the mainland for generations knew that Avalon was and had always been at the centre of their lake. Its walls stood when British tribes still painted their bodies blue to prepare for war and nailed the heads of their enemies over their doorways, before Rome tempered the British spirit with civilization.

While Rome governed Britain, Avalon lay abandoned, moss slowly shrouding its temple and houses, tree spiders diligently draping the emptiness with expectant tracery. Yet when the empire crumbled, despite the long tutelage in Roman efficiency and sophisication, the Britons abandoned everything Roman and reinstituted ancient ways and laws, resurrecting along with them the primordial spirits of water, forest and grove. Avalon was among the religious orders reestablished, and by the time Morgan arrived there the fortress had been active again and thriving for three generations.

For Morgan, though, Avalon meant everything new. Isolated as it was from all common society, the small fortress was nothing like the caers of her early childhood. From a caer, secured atop a wind-haunted promontory or craggy hill, one could always see farms speckling the grassy plains, a river or the ocean perpetually etching its claim on the land, and the verdant retreats of forest stretching untamed to the edge of the world. And inside a caer, the world met. As the main stronghold for an entire *cantref* , warriors and herdsmen, tradesmen and foreigners, farmers, millers, metalworkers, all kinds of people bonded and free, alone or in families lived or came to work awhile behind its secure walls. Twenty paces past Avalon's gates everything vanished in the forest hush, while inside the fortress there were only the bandrui and their students - all female, all dressed alike, all moving to a sacred, ancient routine, unvarying and unassailable.

And even though a more familiar society existed on the mainland, Morgan was never exposed to it. Contact with the village located further up the valley was restricted to three bandrui whose duty it was to obtain the minimal requirements of the fortress, collect rent on Avalon's farm lands, and meet with the locals hired to tend Avalon's livestock. No one from the mainland was permitted to visit the island; all interchange ceased at the ferry landings.

Through the passing of her first three winters at Avalon, Morgan was even more isolated than the rest of her fellow students. Unlike the other girls, she received no gifts, no news from home, no offers to return for a family visit. The reasons for such neglect were unknown and worrisome to her instructors, but the fact that Morgan seemed oblivious to the difference concerned them more. Trudging daily through her duties, Morgan attracted the attention of everyone by keeping utterly to herself. While the other students gossiped, commiserated, giggled and confided about their teachers, their duties, their dreams, Morgan remained reticent and aloof. Alone even in the tiny, single room house she shared with five other girls, self-confined in their presence to her bed of furs on the floor, withdrawn from the central fire, the cauldron, the camaraderie, she made no friends and no one sought her out because she gave no sign of need or really of understanding. Since the day she left her mother's arms Morgan had not spoken a word, had not made a single sound in fear or joy, anger or acceptance, and her voiceless presence became for many a spectral curse - a constant reminder of life's hollow pain, unchecked even in the midst of a community of faith.

Only the Great Lady herself, the Archpriestess Lady Lile, appeared to have boundless patience for Morgan. Once when one of Morgan's instructors complained that because Morgan would not recite the sacred knowledge she could not be learning it - the knowledge was passed from divine mouth to eager ear, perpetuated by the rhythms of wisdom recited through each generation - and that these words fell uselessly on Morgan like water on stone, Lady Lile answered, "Do not underestimate the strength of water. Eventually, even stone falls away."

But even when the cycle of seasons began for the fourth time, no cracks appeared.

Here, where the island rock broke through its thin cover of soil to slope like the undulating spine of a snake down to the water's edge, hidden by moulting horizontal pines that leaned out from the rising land to trail emerald tongues in the glassy dark, she liked to sit and watch unseen, listen unnoticed. Safe in this secret place, Morgan could see the ferry landing around the curve of shore and, on a clear day, she could see the boat set out, a tiny nutshell, from the mainland.

This afternoon a rare sight: there were men at the island landing unloading huge earthenware jars and sacks of foodstuffs onto the shore, their bronze backs shining in the sun, chests flat like a girl's, voices nothing but watery growls wavering through the sharp air. If she were closer she could hear their grunts and breath and words. Hear the words, yes she could. But her opaque centre was always drawing her down, down to the bottom of a long deep well where voices passed far above her, making little difference, touching her not at all in the emptiness. Even the words of her teachers were only billowing clouds passing elegantly by her, though the curious images they formed, secret creatures from wonderful other places, could charm her. She could recreate them whenever she wished, now if she wanted to listen some more - because the men were leaving and the forest was reclaiming all sound. And so from inside the dark pocket she cast the images again, silently, abstractly, filling her world with awesome forms:

sisters of the moon   in whose womb our knowledge
grows   whose milk-light nourishes us   whose
cycle calls forth our quickening blood   who rules
the Eternal Circle   creation growth decline
destruction   praise now the goddesses who bestow
on us the power   to draw down the moon   so
that we may replenish and restore eliminate and
extinguish   in their way   all praise to
    Modron Great Mother   maker-destroyer
guardian of all that begins and ends   Rhiannon
Custodian of the Otherworld   bringer of sleep and
death   Briganti   Healer-Sage   cultivator of
medicinal plants   Suli   Wearer of the Sun
    granter of fertility...

"Morgan! Morgan! There you are. What a fool. I knew you'd be here."

Shards of glass, slicing through the air, piercing the images that fill the darkness: Nimue.

Morgan turned to face the girl who had come to find her. Nimue. Violet eyes, like the very centre of a flame. Violent. And black hair that fell like a shadow down her back with one pure white lock outlining the left side of her fragile face. Dark and light, like -

"Why do you come and sit here, anyway?" After a moment, she shook her head in disgust. "Why do I ask? I might as well talk to a rock, except a rock won't follow you when you call it." Nimue grinned nastily. "But a dog will. Is that what you are?" She jabbed at Morgan provokingly, "A dog? A flea-ridden nuisance?" Jab, jab, jab.

Like the markings of an adder slithering closer to bite.

"C'mon doggy. C'mon." She beckoned, turning to walk away, her hair sinuous along her shoulders and down her back, "Only the goddesses know why, but Lady Lile wants you for her attendant at the ceremony tonight." And then as the forest's jaws closed around her, "Too bad you weren't the sacrifice"

blind Elffin   master of all who met in moon tinted meadows
to learn the songs of our blood   saw neither my sire's
foul seed   nor my mother's savaged earth   and instead
heard only my voice   called it a cup filled   from the
gods' own well   their inspiration overflowing   and so
my beloved master   released my vision   deaf Lile
mistress of all who made the moon touch meadows   to
draw remedy from dew drenched grasses   heard neither harsh
nor hopeless words of Morgan   but saw instead   a lonely
wanderer bereft of father and mother   isolated from
purpose and place   and remembered the silence in her own
youth   roaming with her past the dead of her village
plague-struck   and she the last   the only victim of
the gods' cruelty   raging take me too   lost until she
saw   her place was not with the dead but in service of
the Eternal Circle   through divine design that ending

a beginning preserving her from destruction to bring forth restoration by the healing gift given to her hands

Lile hoped for Morgan too that place and new kinship with her many sisters wished she would hear the call so loud in the spirit

The fire burned low in the central hearth of the small house, and in the spectral light, her movements casting long black tongues around the single, circular room, Lady Lile dressed with ritualized unhurriedness. Morgan, there to assist, moved as she was directed but was fascinated by a world of shadow and light.

First the linen shift, washed and left to dry by the full moon, fresh with the cool gossamer scent of night, fell to whisper at her Lady's ankles. Next the woolen robe, which Morgan unrolled from its wrap of eweskin and dried hawthorn, fragrant and soft and black as the forest in the pre-dawn, draped her in quiet. Then around her Lady's hips Morgan fastened the symbol of divine metamorphosis, a chain of silver swans which gleamed like moonlit clouds on a black wind. Lile herself clasped a silver torque engraved with the dwarf-elder flower around her neck, and finally Morgan placed Lile's mantle, black as well but trimmed with silver thread like crests of moonshine on waves, over her shoulders. Even Lile's hair fell in a single silver and black plait down her back.

Then Lile turned to hook a white bag over Morgan's shoulder. "You, child, will carry my powders and my knife until the fires are lit." She passed a blade, the firelight dancing along its edge, to Morgan. Between her hands on the tips of her fingers, gently, so gently, Morgan twirled it to catch more light.

Lile's hand caught her wrist. "Do you remember your duties tonight, Morgan?" The Lady's voice was soft but insistent.

Morgan looked up at her, all the way up to the top of the well.

"I shall assume that you do." Her hand moved to rest on Morgan's shoulder, then she tucked the knife firmly in Morgan's belt, "We must go now. The moon is almost at its zenith."

Lile's house was the last in a row of thirteen houses which formed the shape of a crescent moon around Avalon's heart, an oak built temple. Morgan followed her Lady like a whisp of fog, like a tail of smoke, and thought not at all about the festival of Beltaine - she'd seen others acted out beyond her and they meant nothing to her - but dwelt instead on the sounds and the smells of this night: a cool wind, true to the month of Willow, had risen with the moon and it muttered through the new leaves, scattered the enticing scent of fertile earth and young blossoms; the fire brand Lile lifted from the forever fire inside the dark temple spat and hissed out a long smoke snake; back outside, Avalon was as quiet as the middle of a lake with night sounds lazily drifting in from its distant forested shores.

All the other women and girls were already at the nemeton, the sacred grove of oak situated on the far side of the island where the forest grew thick under mountain shadow. Now, bearing the goddesses' fire, Morgan and Lile would join them.

Beltaine. The Feast of New Fire. The first night of the Eternal Circle's rising half, a night to celebrate birth and growth, fertility and regeneration. At the centre of the nemeton was a clearing where the nineteen priestesses of Avalon including the Archpriestess - one to represent every year of the briton Cycle or Great Year - formed the first circle around twin firepits. The next circle was formed by those women who were secondarily admitted to the Art, ones who would eventually leave Avalon to practice their healing gift amongst their own tribes. And lastly the girls, students of the Art, formed the third. Morgan, however, took her place just behind Lile, apart from any circle, and waited for her signals.

Lile raised the torch above her head and stepped into the centre of the women. As was expected of her, Morgan moved up to fill Lile's place in the circle. Then the chants began. Hands clasped, the women called for the eyes, for the arms, for the ears, for the womb of the goddess, each goddess in her turn. Morgan listened and surprisingly every chorus began to ripple over her like warm water. She could actually feel the words. An extraordinarily crisp moon beamed down on her and she wondered.

Slowly Lile bent to light the waiting tinder in each pit with the sacred flame, and then tossed the brand into the new fire. A great cheer went up and, startled, Morgan ran to bring Lile the bag. From inside it Lady Lile pulled two small sacks tied together with a leather thong.

"May the birth of this season be quick and strong." Lile threw the powder onto the first fire and a pillar of pink smoke exploded into the black air.

A coiled pink monster tongue, so close, so huge it could wrap around her and pull her past those glinting yellow teeth, brought a dancing chill to Morgan's spine.

"And its growth be great and good." Another plume ignited in the second fire, green this time.

A dragon's tail, lashing out to reach her.

Rising in intensity, the women's voices stretched the words into rhythmic moans, reverberating down the well to where she was, and now they soaked Morgan through, filling her eyes and ears and nose and mouth. Lile held out her hand for the knife and Morgan, moving through the thick water that swirled around her, could not decide where the handle was.

Lile clasped her hand over Morgan's. "Here, child", she whispered.

The knife slipped free and caught fire, the light dancing along its edge. Holding the blade high above her head, Lile continued.

"New Blood and New Fire, purify this blade. Sanctify its cutting to make the womb full and quick..." Swiftly Lile bared Morgan's forearm and sliced a triangle, the symbol of the womb, into the translucent skin. Morgan felt no pain, only a sudden release of energy, a warmth which scurried through her body.

As the blood welled Lile ran the flat of the blade over it until both sides were smeared with red. Then she raised the knife up once more and lifted her eyes to the moon.

Fireglow and moonglow combined to animate the blood with sparks of life. And each dancing, dazzling bit Morgan felt piercing her, bursting open into words, the words of her teachers so that suddenly she knew, felt the full knowledge of what was happening. Morgan knew that her blood, New Blood because it had never been shed in menstruation, was richest with the force of life for the same reason. None of the life-giving power within her had ever before been drawn out and so could mix now with New Fire to purify and strengthen. Her blood was also most pleasing to the goddess of Spring, Blodeuwedd.

"New Blood and New Fire, bring forth New Life". Lile passed the blade through the fire, and women and girls as one moaned a long, clear sound of ecstacy.

Blodeuwedd, whose own blood was the soil which hungered for the newly spilt blood of a sacred King to fructify it.

Lile nudged Morgan sharply and Morgan remembered to run. Down to the edge of the grove and into the thicket of hawthorn beyond it where the sacrifice waited, tethered and afraid. She felt hot and faint and the scent of dark earth was too strong and the pulse of black breath from the bull- calf too hot, too sweet. A bull-calf was always given to Blodeuwedd at Beltaine, and its blood became the vital blood of the sacred King, which would feed the soil of Blodeuwedd, fruitful Blodeuwedd whose own divine blood and body took the form of flowers, hawthorn flowers, and who once fed would create and bring forth a season of New Life.

She placed her hand on its hot silken nose and she could see the glimmer of moonlight in its eyes. Before that soft light, before the billowing scent of hawthorn which grew rampant in the grove, could overcome her, she grabbed the animal's tether and yanked and yanked and yanked until they broke through to the clearing.

Now others ran to help because the calf was afraid of the flames, and in a crush of feverish urgings Morgan felt her self carried along, a whisp of flame herself. Once they reached the place before the twin fires where Lile waited, all except Morgan fell back. She was to remain, to walk the animal between the fires in order to purify it.

The calf had to be pulled, and pushed, its moon-filled eyes white with fear.

And now the animal was looking right at her, right into her, from its frightened silent place down into hers and suddenly she saw he was like her - afraid, alone, unable to go back. More than this, Morgan *felt* the animal's pain and something long forgotten stirred inside her, a strange kind of heat. A piece of flame must have lept inside her, an angry whisp that demanded to grow. And the hot calf life fed it. Morgan let go of the rope.

Just as quickly Lile gathered the rope back up and finished leading the animal back out from between the fires. Then she secured the tether to an iron stake which stuck up from the ground.

Morgan felt the bite of the rope at her neck, the pull of the earth as it held her fast, the searing breath of the blaze.

"Blodeuwedd, may the blood of this bull-calf be pleasing to you." Lile wrapped one shadowed arm around the throat of the calf. "And with it, may you make the earth fruitful, bringing forth New Life." The knife arced, glistening red.

The sight of her blood on the knife seared a path through to her centre and suddenly Morgan could move. She felt utterly connected to this animal and its life. She knew her blood would mix with his, uniting them, giving both of them over to New Life and change. And she ran not knowing whether she wanted this change, this sacrifice, whether she wanted to stop the knife from falling or help push it deep into the throat.

But she had been released too late and the knife came down without her. With one sharp bleat the calf gave itself over to the goddess and its blood gushed on the thirsty earth. And Morgan came to rest beside its lolling head, its hot life churning over her sandaled feet. The burning in her flickered and gasped.

Dimly she heard the others cheer and cry out, felt Lile's firm hands lift her and lead her off to the side as the others ran to form a long line. Her ears still rang with the calf's bleat and now the women's yells, and everything around her was as if she had just awakened, confusing and too sharp. One by one she saw the women and girls run at a dizzying speed between the two fires, their white shifts billowing near the yellow licks of flame, and fall on their knees before the sacrifice to rub themselves with the blood and the earth until they were smeared and soiled like those just returned from battle, like those newly born.

Then, lastly, it was her turn to kneel in the blood. Lile's hands guiding her, trembling, she touched the icy fluid to her cheeks, felt the heat of the blood in her body rise to meet its cold cousin, and swooned as the connection reformed, a beam of light which led all the way down to the bottom of her well.

Lile covered Morgan with her own mantle and left her resting safely against a wide oak. Morgan had not fainted for long apparently because everyone else was just heading out of the nemeton to where the hawthorn grew, hurrying to gather the blossoms, smear their faces with the scent and wash them in the dew drenched leaves before dawn brought colour to the sky. The touch of hawthorn would bless them, bring them power and favour, and as Morgan watched their white forms disperse like whisps of fog among the black leaves, she felt again the touch of the light. Exposed, fragile in its glare, she snuggled deeper into the cloak and closed her eyes.

She woke as the dark edges of sky were retracting to reveal ribbons of pink and scarlet. No one was in the nemeton. No sounds came from the thicket. Morgan let herself drift back into the undemanding dark of half-sleep, feeling warm and hidden and distant from the night's events. Just as a deeper wave of sleep rose to reclaim her, They came. Like the shadow of a goddess's hand, They descended on a hawthorn tree just visible at the edge of the nemeton directly across from where she lay. Thirteen ravens, silent, heavy. The blossoms sagged towards the earth. Awakened by the low rumble of so many wings, thinking it must be thunder from that black cloud, it was only when one at the very top of the tree began to caw that she really saw them.

Thirteen? Really? She counted them again. Yes, thirteen. One for every month in the year, for every turn of the moon, a full cycle, a beginning and an end. She sat up straight, the cloak falling from her shoulders. Where was everyone? They should be coming back now. They should see this.

And the one, the very highest on the tree kept cawing and cawing, no! Laughing. She could hear it, more clearly than anything she had ever heard. It was a laugh. Her laugh! The same laugh the raven had learned from her so long ago in the place she remembered as home.

The laugh ran down her spine, through her toes and fingers, and she gulped and shuddered. My friend, she wanted to call out, but her voice, so long unused, had forgotten how to use the air. My friend! How did you find me?

I have always been with you

What? It had answered her! But she'd made no sound...

Here we need no words

Here? suddenly Morgan was aware that the light which had pierced to the bottom of her well, was something more. She sensed a presence in it, and tingled with the realization that she was no longer alone. And as soon as she acknowledged the other, the light began to spread, filling every crevice and corner with a honey warmth, rising stone over stone. For the first time Morgan felt the hollow dark thin and tear.

Who are you? She was shaking inside so hard she thought she'd burst open. Who are you? And she half rose to challenge the raven, but it was gone! The bird at the top of the hawthorn had disappeared, leaving only twelve black guardians watching her. Where are you? Panic rose in her. Don't leave me!

Here I am   Beside you as I have always been
And always shall be

No. I am alone. I lost everything. With a sharp crack the piece of flame that had found life within her as she met the bull-calf's eyes rekindled and seared a path for her feelings. Everyone left me . Why? Why did my mother leave me? Why don't I have a family? Why am I all alone? I have been left, abandoned, and everything and everyone is dead or disappeared.

No   I am always with you   I can never be lost   Only unheard   Now is the time for you to abandon your loss and take from the power inside you   Come Morgan   Come to me
You are mine

And the light lifted Morgan beyond her anger, higher, higher, toward the voices, so many voices now. And it seemed those voices were rushing toward her too.

Floating, deliciously free, suddenly Morgan recognized the presence with her. It was the Great Mother, the goddess.

You are mine Morgan

"Modron!" she cried out and collapsed weeping into Lady Lile's arms.

Ash

Tree of Regeneration

What happened to Morgan that Beltaine remained her secret. Only Lady Lile seemed to share with Morgan a comprehension of it that needed no words. For the benefit of the rest of the community, Lady Lile explained it as that rare occurence when a bandrui student was consecrated to a goddess through a profound experience rather than by simply choosing which goddess she would serve. Such a revelatory moment, Lile said, meant that the girl was specially chosen and so would be capable of a mysterious communication with that goddess quite beyond the ordinary bandruic gift.

Certainly the change in Morgan was profound. She became the most ardent of students, moving quickly and thoroughly through her lessons beyond the abilities of others her age. Eagerly she memorized all the plants of meadow and wood, their sacred properties and powers, and no other student showed more skill in their harvesting or preparation. So inspirited was Morgan's behaviour in fact that Lile chose to contribute personally to her training, privately instructing her in the mystical secrets of the Art. To those bandrui closest to her, Lisle confided her certainty that Morgan had been inspired to dedicate her life to Avalon and would remain there as a priestess instead of leaving to serve her tribe as would most of the other girls. Over time it became common to see the two of them together, Lile doting and encouraging, Morgan questioning or raptly attentive, almost as though they were devoted mother and daughter.

Only one person remained unimpressed by the change in Morgan and was instead more antagonistic towards her: Nimue. Now the *second* best student at Avalon, Nimue was openly resentful of the attention directed towards Morgan by Lady Lile and did her best to discredit Morgan whenever possible. Of course neither she nor anyone at Avalon could have guessed that Morgan's future was in no way as certain as it seemed. Other forces were busy designing a different path, one that would take her away from the concerns of Nimue and Lile for some time. But then, no one at Avalon knew how important Morgan really was.

Six summers after Morgan's revelation at Beltaine, when she was sixteen years old, she was the object of a quite different concern by the most powerful man in the *cantref* of Gwent.

Merlin had been waiting over a fortnight for the return of his messenger and now, agitatedly pacing unobserved in the main hall of Caer Leon, he was long past impatience and virtually seething. Still, there was nothing in his power that could shorten the journey between Gwent and the far northern *cantref* of Rheged, so wait he must.

He picked up a piece of kindling from the central firepit and snapped it into tiny pieces. Then, tossing the sticks into the cold ashes, he crossed the long, empty room and went out into the sunshine.

In the summer, Caer Leon was an exotic jewel, a prismatic pool of colour and movement set in sun-whitened walls and accented by the sparkle of grassland and water. Surrounded by hills and a smooth coastal plain which led to the estuary of the River Usk, the caer had once been a treasure in the Roman array of fortressess, one of the main locations where the elite of the Roman military, the legionary soldiers, had focussed their control of British soil. At that time the fortress occupied fifty fortified acres and used much of the surrounding grassland for billeting and entertainment. For the latter purpose, the Romans had erected a marvellous ampitheatre, which still stood outside the caer's walls, its oval tiers brittle after a hundred winters of disuse.

It was Merlin's own father, Ambrosius, who reclaimed Caer Leon as the new seat of British power. After he led the British tribes out of the chaos caused by the end of the Roman occupation, uniting them and proclaiming himself High

Chieftain, he chose Caer Leon in his home *cantref* of Gwent as his fortress. Ambrosius had British style circular houses and a rectangular, two-room main hall erected within the fortress, integrating them with the remaining rows of Roman barracks and stables to create an extraordinary farrago of tradition and efficiency.

Ambrosius was an amazing man, one who could truly be called great. When he assumed the title of High Chieftain, the Chieftains of every other *cantref* eagerly swore allegiance to him even though the Britons as a people had a traditional distrust of "Kings". They realized that it was his genius alone which saved them from being obliterated by the Saxons after the Roman armies left and they saw that Ambrosius stood apart from them, a man of vision and great courage.

Something of that man could be seen in the dark, angular figure of his son. Behind Merlin's iron grey eyes and in the reedy grace and expediency of his movements, he had his father's charisma, a presence almost sexual in its power to arouse dedication and pursuit. No less did his druidic powers, the magic and mystery afforded him, contribute to his ability to influence those around him. While all druids were venerated for their training and the positions they held in ruling families as judges, teachers, advisors and priests, Merlin somehow seemed more enigmatic, perhaps even divine in his errorless appraisals and uncanny knowledge of every act.

Like his father too, Merlin had directed the development of Caer Leon and Gwent, not as High Chieftain himself but as Advisor to series of Chieftains beginning with Ambrosius's brother, Uther, and ending with the present ineffectual, slow-witted son of an armourer. After Uther died, Merlin tried to be both war-leader and Advisor, but the tribes of Gwent would not permit it. Because tradition dictated that a druid could never be a Chieftain, the tribes demanded that a real war-leader be found. Merlin stepped aside with equanimity.

The first to succeed Uther was a stong-willed, curious man who lived for only a year after he claimed the title. The next died in a border skirmish, which a few thought could have been avoided. The present Chieftain, Cuall, had survived his office the longest, but rumblings of discontent about his abilities as a strategist could be heard throughout Gwent. It was only through the strength of Merlin's influence that Cuall remained in command. And Merlin's circle of influence was growing steadily.

A summer wind rippled through Merlin's long, raven-black hair as he stood outside Enhinti's house. Enhinti was the woman he currently went to for diversion.

He called out to her and stepped past the hide covered doorway into the circular single room. She was tending the cauldron which hung over the central fire pit, and rose with a smile when he entered. A comfortable looking woman, Enhinti was round and ruddy like a hazlenut, solid but sensual with a maternal responsiveness that attracted more than a few men.

Merlin's interest, however, was based on quite another aspect of her character: Enhinti loved possessions. She could blissfully pass an afternoon re-examining all that she had collected, and was always eager to show others. From a small trunk she would pull out gold armlets, brooches made from boar's-tusk ivory and enamelled bronze, delicate glass bangles and beads. Then from a larger one she would remove piece after piece of rare silk, imported red pottery stamped with the figures of animals from far off lands, bone- handled knives carved with birds and flowers; and an exquisite hanging lamp of beaten bronze, with a hook the shape of a butterfly inlaid with millefiori glass. She used none of these things, only kept them for her pleasure. And she always wanted more.

Merlin occasionally added to her acquisitions, watching her assessment and placement of them with wry amusement. The irony about Enhinti was that, although she would do anything to increase her holdings, she considered herself a moral woman. If asked, she would say without guile that she conducted her life with only the best intentions. There was nothing that amused Merlin more than those who could or would not see themselves. And nothing he found more useful.

He crossed over to her and slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to his chest. "I'm bored," he said blandly.

"Oh, really?" she said, pushing away from him and laughing like a young girl. "And I'm just something to pass the time, I suppose."

"Yes."

She looked at him sharply for a moment and then grinned, returning to his arms and wrapping hers around his neck. "I know that's not true. You're mean to tease me."

Merlin only smiled a little.

"I'm expecting my sister and her husband back shortly. Were you...um...planning to stay a while?"

He nodded. "When?"

She grimaced. "They're only at the tanner's. I'll come to your house as soon as I can."

He released her and unclasped her arms from his neck. Holding her hands against his lips, he kissed the fingers softly. Then, as he let her hands go and lowered his arms, he brushed her nipple with his fingers, letting them linger until it was hard. "Hurry," he whispered.

A mouse ran across the pelts and onto the straw-covered floor.

"Ugh!" Enhinti kicked at the rodent and then snuggled next to Merlin for protection. "Do you think it was here with us all the time?" She shivered and kicked nervously once more.

The druid shrugged. "Does it matter? You didn't notice it until now." Freeing himself from her embrace, he propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her. "Nothing matters till it's noticed."

Enhinti didn't look comforted. Silence filled the space between them until Enhinti noticed that Merlin was lost in thought. She reached up and pulled at his neatly trimmed beard. "May only the gods hear?"

He looked questioningly at her.

"...What's troubling you," she explained. "Can you share it with us lowly mortals?"

"I had hoped to be on the road by now, that's all. The good weather won't last."

She sat up, pulling one of the furs along to cover herself, and looked at him curiously. "You're going on a journey?"

"Yes. I told you."

"No," she shook her head and watched him closely, "no you didn't."

He rolled away from her and reached for his tunic, which, because the bed rested on the floor, lay easily within reach.

"Where?" she insisted.

Because the knee length garment was made of linen for summer wear, he could easily brush away the pieces of straw which clung to it. After pulling the garment over his head, he stood to draw on his braccae, which covered the length of his legs. As he tightened their draw-string waist, he answered casually, "To visit a cousin in the north." He bent to begin securing the leggings by cross-gartering them with long leather strips.

"Really?" Enhinti said a little too brightly. "I have cousins in the north. In Rheged. Are you going that far? It gets cold there sooner than here, I think."

Merlin stood up again to fasten his belt around his tunic and said with just a trace of impatience "No, not that far. Just to - " He broke off and studied her closely. "You have cousins in Rheged? You've never mentioned them before."

His sudden scrutiny obviously flustered her. Cheeks red as berries, she tried to shrug nonchalantly. "I have kin everywhere."

"Are they close kin in Rheged?"

"Why?"

"Are they?" he insisted.

She studied her toes, free from the warmth of the furs. "Yes, well, family's family, isn't it?" She gave him a tenuous smile.

Merlin's eyes, like polished stones, glittered with hard intent.

Under his gaze, Enhinti fidgeted nervously. "Why are you looking at me that way?" she asked meekly. "As if I were a mouse...and you a hawk."

unacknowledged folly Merlin was of his father's
misdirected youth the bastard fruit of an idle spring
left unharvested and he a child of no import
fancied for himself a sire divine one who would some
day return to claim his special son so he went to the
priesthood hopeful of discovery when through the
influence of his sacred office he discerned his father's
identity he despaired sovereign Ambrosius saw no boon
in a bastard priest preferring the certain blood of a
sister's son or the well-grown progeny of his wife's womb
for his heir so Merlin was relegated to inexpediency
but he saw in the pain of dismissal britain's destiny
was his

Merlin. Incredibly it was he stepping off the Avalon ferry to stand on the mossy bank of the island, sunlight splattering through the leaves to fall in gold drops on his hands. News of his impending visit had created mounting excitement within the community, so when the passenger was sighted the younger girls ran, barefoot, to the water's edge, gathering their white sheaths high over brown limbs, to congregate in the sharp air and peer over one another's shoulders. He waited, resting but not dependent on his staff, for their nervous twittering to be hushed.

The appearance of Lady Lile silenced them instantly. The Lady of the Lake strode towards Merlin, morning mist clinging to the hem of her fern coloured gown, and extended her hands. "Sage Merlin, we are honoured."

Passing his staff of office to one of his two attendants, Merlin took her hands in his. "Lady Lile, it is my honour as well." He smiled slightly, but his eyes were the grey of a winter sea and gave back no light. He wore the simple black woollen robe of druidic office, but his belt was of new deerskin with silver crosspieces and a silver and amethyst buckle. His cloak, black as well, was trimmed with silver brocade and around his neck he wore the unmistakable mark of his high status in the Art, a marvelous torque twisted from silver into spirals and lace and then inlaid with profiles delicately carved from amethyst - the faces of the gods lying casually on the pulse of his throat.

"I realize how extraordinary a visitor is here," Merlin continued, retrieving his staff and surveying his audience, "and I would not wish to do or ask for anything that would compromise the sanctity of your fortress." He fixed his attention once more on Lady Lile and paused.

She graciously took the signal. "Respected Sir, it is certainly possible for us to make you and your attendants comfortable at one of our hearths without violating our sacred areas. Please," she made a sweeping gesture towards the gates, "you are most welcome to grace us with your presence."

Merlin placed one narrow hand on the Lady's shoulder and interrupted, "Then, perhaps, you could have me shown to *your* hearth. My journey has been a long one, and I would take great pleasure in a cup of wine."

Lady Lile's shoulders straightened and she hesitated. Wine was a forbidden luxury in bandrui circles, and for a moment it looked as though she were going to remind him tersely of that fact.

Merlin kept his gaze and his hand steadily on her.

At last, moving back slightly to delicately distance herself from his touch, she signalled one of the initiates to her side and ordered, "Go and make sure my fire is lit and have food brought."

The first inside, Morgan flopped down on her bed of furs, which occupied a small space of ground beside the wall, and watched the others of her house return. Like she, the bandrui who shared her house were all young, being between thirteen and sixteen years old, and now, out of sight of their superiors, they gave up their trained composure for a chattering excitement not unlike the younger initiates.

"Well, why do you think he's here then, Elen?" At the giggled response, Nimue turned sharply, "Morgan? Since you found your voice, you always have an opinion."

Morgan was lying on her side apparently fascinated by Nimue's shoes. The sunlight that came in through the open doorway illuminated them, making their leather thongs cast black twins across the girl's insteps.

"Most come for metalwork," she answered nonchalantly. "I suppose he's here for that."

"Oh, of course. Here on the island when the famous metalwork is done on the mainland. If that's all he wants, what's he doing here, talking to Our Lady?"

"Oh, Nimue," Morgan rolled over onto her back and stretched languidly on the warm pelts, "it's probably something just as boring."

Shaking her head, Nimue came over and sat on the edge of Morgan's furs. "That's not what you think." She jabbed

Morgan's leg with her finger, "That's not what you think at all."

Elen stirred the coals of their central firepit back to life as each of the other girls took seats on the straw-covered ground and quietly watched the interchange. Understandably, none of them wished to participate. The animosity between Morgan and Nimue, though usually covert since they started sharing a house, was no less combustible than it had ever been, and their housemates had been amply exposed to the dangers of getting too close to it.

Assigning Nimue and Morgan to the same house had been the final attempt by their teachers to foster a more tolerant attitude in the girls for each other. Not only did it dismay the senior bandrui that their two most promising students were enemies, but also that the personal magnetism of each girl was great enough to separate the rest of the students into two camps.

Morgan, though plain in appearance, gave forth a quiet strength that let those around her find their own centre of calm, yet her eyes, like bright new leaves, were afire with the eagerness of life. Her dedication and expertise attracted those who were fascinated by the mystery of their faith.

Nimue, though a little younger than Morgan, already had an amazing presence, some of it because of her rare beauty: black hair with one lock of pure white outlining the left side of her fragile face, and violet eyes, bright and hard as amethyst. The rest of that presence came from a formidable will enhanced by piercing analytical skills. Those who wanted answers went to Nimue.

More than once Morgan had loudly accused Nimue of the expedient use of their sacred knowledge. More than that, Nimue spoke of Morgan's addled mind.

"Instead," Morgan drawled, "why don't you tell me what you think? I wouldn't want to take any attention away from you."

Elen coughed nervously and glanced quickly at the other girls.

Circling her arms around her knees, Morgan egged, "Go on. Enlighten us."

In a seemingly benign manner Nimue sat back on her heels and smiled. "Why Morgan, I sincerely thought you could tell me. After all," she shrugged, "you're the one who knows him."

Like a shove, Nimue's words physically rocked Morgan.

The other girls shrieked, "You know Merlin?"

Because of Morgan's early difficulties, the whole community had been cautioned by Lady Lile not to pry into or really even mention the family who remained absent from Morgan's life. Consequently none of Morgan's peers knew much if anything of Morgan's lineage or history. Except Nimue, obviously. How she found out was a mystery, but then, Nimue had a talent for discovery.

Morgan looked anxiously at the group around the fire and then back at Nimue. "No," she answered shakily. "No...I - I don't."

"He was your stepfather's Advisor."

Morgan pushed her back up against the wall, wrapped her arms around her knees even more tightly. "I was too little. I don't know him."

"Not at all?"

"I remember his face, Nimue," Morgan snapped.

Suddenly and for only a moment they all fell silent, as if the face everyone had seen today loomed before them again: eyes the colour of cold rain, precipitous features etched with dark cloud, the flash of a disarming smile.

"I remember that," Morgan insisted quietly.

"Well, that's not too much, is it? And here I thought you could provide us with such insight. What a disappointment."

Typically, Nimue liked to get all of an opponent's weapons out in the open, where she could see them and deal with them. She didn't like surprises. Apparently this time she decided that Morgan wasn't really armed at all and dismissed her unceremoniously by turning her back on Morgan and addressing the room in general. "I say he's here to talk to Our Lady about all the trouble in Gwent."

"Gwent?" Elen interjected, "But we're in Powys."

"Very good. You're getting better at geography all the time." Nimue gave the girl a look that challenged her to interupt again.

"I meant," Elen continued, bravely defending herself, "that I can't see what politics has to do with us. Avalon, I mean. Our Lady's not trained in druidic strategy. So how could he be here for anything political?"

"What's happening in Gwent, Nimue?" Morgan asked quietly but with command.

Nimue turned back and studied her carefully. Through the chimney, a slat of sunlight angled down in front of the firefly coals and cast each face half in shadow. And she answered her slowly. "Doubt. Fear."

Morgan watched her intently. "About?" she prompted.

With suspicion flickering like a dark bird in her eyes, Nimue continued. "Many of the tribes in Gwent want a new warchief, one that Merlin has no say in choosing."

"So?" Morgan shrugged.

"So, that warchief might not want Merlin as his Advisor. Merlin is a powerful man, but he stands to lose it. And I don't think he'd be satisfied teaching the children of some wealthy landowner in a homestead so far off even the gods have forgotten about it."

Morgan shook her head. "I still don't see how that involves Our Lady. Like Elen said..."

"I've also heard," Nimue interrupted, "that Merlin's been holding off any change in leadship with a prophecy. He's claiming a Vate has prophesied that a bold, young warrior will soon rise up from obscurity, someone no one could ever guess, to make Gwent the strongest of all *cantrefs* once more. Convenient, don't you think? Now consider, Lady Lisle is well respected throughout the religious community. Her opinion crosses all borders." A smug grin crossed her face, and she paused to make sure she had everyone's complete attention. "I think he's here to get Our Lady to say she's heard this prophecy too."

Like the sudden gust of a cold wind, a collective gasp echoed around the room.

Morgan recovered first. She drew herself up, placed both her hands firmly on the floor, and leaned forward to confront the still grinning Nimue. "Surely even you would not stoop so low as to insinuate that a *druid* would compromise the truth of prophecy by *concocting* one. Or that a *bandrui* would condone it."

Nimue's grin shrank to a sneer. "Don't be so naive."

Obviously furious, Morgan clenched the furs beneath her, as though preventing her fists from flying up into Nimue's face, and shouted. "Me! You don't *know* anything! You sleep with wine traders for their stories and then bring back your vile little lies and use them to undermine the things most of us struggle to keep precious and sacred...to understand. You're clever, but you don't know anything. And I refuse to let you impress anyone with your...your..." Either frustrated or spent, Morgan seemed to regain some control and turned her attention abruptly to the others instead.

"If the Vates have prophesied such a thing, it is true, and would have nothing to do with why Merlin is here. Nothing. He has travelled a very long way to consult on a spiritual matter, yes." She looked back pointedly at Nimue. "After all...*that* is what Our Lady concerns herself with. Most likely it involves some portent or failed petition. It may even mean serious trouble between us mortals and the gods."

Nimue opened her eyes very wide in mock fear.

Morgan ignored her. "But it in *no way* involves the political aspirations of anyone..."

Nimue clucked her tongue in disgust.

"...because that is something Our Lady would never consider." Morgan folded her arms across her chest and looked squarely at Nimue.

Drawing a long breath and tilting her head back to shake the hair out of her eyes, Nimue preened for a moment and then replied nonchalantly, "I don't know why I am ever tempted to consider you a worthy opponent, Morgan. You're too conventional to be a challenge. Sometimes I think you still live in a world all by yourself."

Just then, one of the youngest initiates came to the doorway, a small shadow with a tiny voice. "Morgan?"

"Yes?" Morgan's tone was still angry and the girl ducked shyly.

"Th-they sent me for you."

"Who?"

The child stepped in and with wide open eyes whispered, "Th-the druid. And Our Lady. The druid has asked for you."

Morgan stood shakily. And missed the look of fear that crossed Nimue's face.

Magic seemed a breathing, whispering presence in Lile's house. Though circular and single-roomed like all the others and similarily furnished with wooden trunks, a bed of furs, ceramic jars and pots, and an iron cauldron which hung over the central fire pit, Lile's house also held the mysteries of the Otherworld on its walls. Surrounding any who took their place by the fire were the vividly painted, beautiful and horrible faces of Modron, Rhiannon, Briganti, Macha, Badhbh and the other goddesses. With them, fixed in fierce or powerful expression, were carved figures of the sacred horse, owl, hawk, pig, bear, serpent and raven. That silent audience loomed, half-lit by the low fire, suspended in shadowed space, watching now.

But the presence in the house was subtly different this time: Lile was absent and in her place, sitting on the straw close to the fire, his cloak settled around him like a coiled adder, was Merlin. He beckoned to Morgan, "You needn't remain standing." His voice was like cold water, making her start. "Come," he let a smile spread across his face and gestured to a place on the floor beside him, "sit beside me."

Though Morgan ventured closer, she did not accept his offer. Instead she stood opposite, the fire between them, and remained silent, expressionless; but she trembled.

His smile grew even more reassuring. "I'm sure that my request to see you was a surprise, but you have nothing to worry about. I'm not here to bring you any bad tidings. In fact, quite the opposite."

He took advantage of her hesitance to slowly appraise her. "You have Rica's appearance," he said matter-of-factly, "His hair, and the same solid build. But you have your mother's eyes." Then, as if looking back across the years, his gaze grew distant and unfocussed. "She had that colour green, and the wide spacing. A striking woman, Ygraine."

Sharply, Morgan interrupted his reverie, all trepidation suddenly gone from her manner. "What do you mean *had* ? Where is my mother?"

"Oh, Morgan, I'm sorry. I forgot you hadn't been told."

Even those who were the least acquainted with Merlin knew that he never forgot anything. Unfortunately Morgan was not among them. Instead she almost ran to him, falling on her knees in the straw, clutching at his arm in her blind urgency to know.

"What? What do you mean?"

Merlin took a little time to compose himself, reaching for the coarse, earthenware cup on the floor beside him to take a long swallow.

"My dear," he said at last, smoothing his moustache dry, gazing at her with saddened eyes, "because of the difficulties you had adjusting to your fosterage here at Avalon, it was decided that some things were better kept from you. Enough sad circumstances surrounded your coming here." Replacing his cup, he touched her shoulder. As though the weight of a great grief settled on him, he slumped a little and said softly, "Your mother is dead, Morgan. Long dead."

Morgan simply let her fingers slip away from the druid's sleeve. Above her, the placid eyes of Modron flickered ever so slightly with firelight.

"A fever took her, not long after you arrived here. These things are unpredictable," he added consolingly.

"Does Lady Lile know? Did she keep this from me?" Morgan's tone was so soft, so thin it was almost as though she were speaking from inside some dark, deep tunnel.

Entwining his long fingers, he rested his hands in his lap and nodded solemnly. "Lile agreed with me at the time that it would be best not to over-burden you. It was one of the few things on which she did agree with me.

"I was very concerned for you, Morgan," he explained, sliding one hand over hers. "Being all alone here, in such a strict and uncompromising place. It worried me so much, in fact, that I tried to have you taken from here and sent to a caring family." Briefly, a harsh light came into his eyes. "But Lady Lile would not recognize my right to do so, and stood rigidly by your Mother's arrangements." He shrugged apologetically. "I did my best. I hope it has not been too lonely for you."

Obviously only half listening to the druid, her eyes foggy with hurt, Morgan pulled her hands away from his. "I've found my place here."

"Good. I'm relieved to hear that. But I am sure you will still find my news welcome. I have arranged for you to have a place of your own, a *home* of your own with position and wealth. Everything you lost."

Now Morgan looked directly at him, and after a moment she said unwaveringly, "That's not what I lost."

"Morgan, listen." Merlin leaned towards her, "I have arranged a marriage for you. An excellent marriage. To Uryen of Rheged!"

Suddenly pale, she half-whispered, "No."

"Morgan..."

"No."

Impatience edged his words. "Morgan. These arrangements were made at great personal cost. You must know you have nothing to recommend yourself to any decent marriage. Out of my concern and affection for you, I took it upon myself to provide --"

"That's very kind of you, Sage, but unnecessary." Though she interrupted him, her tone was courteous and formal. "I have decided to dedicate myself to Avalon." Gazing up in confirmation at the face of the goddess, she continued softly, "Not to go out into the world and practice my healing Art, nor to marry, but to stay here and serve Modron." There was no longer any hint of disquiet in her and she met Merlin's gaze with resolve.

An ember crumbled, spitting red, into cool grey ash. Letting his steel eyes rest heavily on her, Merlin shifted his tone so that his words fell in precise, glowing ingots. "I'm told you are intelligent, Morgan. You must understand that you made that decision thinking you had no other choice. Now you have other possibilities to consider. Marriage," he continued even more slowly, "would give you back a family." A cold life came back to his eyes. "That is what you feel you really lost, isn't it?"

Merlin had struck upon Morgan's most tender wish. He did not need to see the look of pain that filled her eyes to have it confirmed. Without waiting for a response, he continued his urgings in more compelling tones. "Think. You'd have children. Blood of your own."

The sweet vision he was creating seemed to entrance Morgan. Holding his gaze, she settled back to sit on her heels.

"And you'd be near your sister, Margawse, too. She lives in the *cantref* that borders Rheged. Imagine seeing your sister again."

To Merlin's obvious surprise, his words had the reverse effect on Morgan, suddenly rousing rather than lulling her. "Why should I care about kin who has never contacted me during all this time?" she countered. "No." Morgan shook her head firmly and crossed her arms, "What family I have is here."

Watching her, eyes hooded and still, finally he asked, "Are you so sure, my dear?" His words crept around her, sibilant and sultry, seeking entry. "What if I told you that you *had* other close family. Someone who, by necessity, has been kept from you. Who doesn't know that you exist either, but who now needs your help." Above him, Modron, incorporeal, eyeless, her hollow sockets filled with fire shadow, watched all.

A struggle between doubt and determination played across Morgan's face. She shook her head, "How can that be?"

"Would you be interested?"

"There can't be anyone else."

Straightening, his narrow face sharpened by the firelight, he hissed, "How dare you insinuate that I would lie."

"Oh, no, Sage. I didn't mean that. I only meant that I didn't understand --"

Merlin waved her trembling plea away, but did not release her from his gaze.

Taking a deep breath, Morgan looked down at the floor for a moment and then back up at the druid. "Sir, I, I would like to understand how such a thing could be."

A shadow of satisfaction flickered across his face. "If I am to tell you, share a most important secret with you, I must have one assurance. And that is, that you open your finely trained mind to the exploration of new ideas. New roads, shall we say. With me."

"My mind isn't closed. I just know what I want."

"So, Morgan...do you *want* to know this secret?"

As if some unseen snake wound its way up her back, Morgan shuddered spontaneously, but she nodded.

"Perhaps, first, you'd care for some wine." With a casual air he reached towards the jug that was just beyond him on the floor and carefully poured some of its contents into a waiting cup.

Morgan held up her hand to refuse. "No. Thank you. It is not permitted."

"Morgan," came the reply, patiently, with a stress placed on every word, "I have just given you permission. Here," he leaned forward holding the cup out to her, "take it."

Hand shaking, her fingers closed around the vessel, though she did not raise it to her lips.

"Aren't you going to taste it?"

The wine in her cup gleamed as the light flashed across its bloody surface. She took a small mouthful and grimanced as she swallowed.

Looking pleased, Merlin stretched out slowly until he was resting comfortably on his side, head supported by his hand, elbow on the ground, and swirled his own wine. Firelight danced along the length of his body and brought life to the faces on his torc. He gazed back up at Morgan.

"You have a brother, Morgan. A younger brother."

At Morgan's sudden start, Merlin held his finger to his lips. "No, no. This must be kept a secret. His life depends on it. Now just be patient and I shall explain everything.

"Your mother's last child did not die at birth, as even she believed. Through my efforts he was saved and taken to a safe place, but his existence had to be unknown. And still must."

The druid sat up, straightened his belt, and was silent. A path of dusty sunlight led down from the chimney to a place on the floor just the other side of him, clearing the darkness away. He shifted, putting it behind him, and then returned to his story.

"Why is the child in danger? Well you see, your stepfather, Uther, though an impressive warrior, was a deplorable diplomat. Because of his crudeness, the unification of Britain, which my father had so marvelously achieved, soon fractured. Rica was one of the first chieftains to pull away from the alliance. And even though chieftains and advisors from many other *cantrefs* held your father in more esteem than they did Uther, Uther refused to see that coveting your mother was one of the most damaging diplomatic moves he could make. To have any hope of maintaining what little was left of the alliance, and his title of *High* Chieftain, Uther could not openly show that he held Rica in any disregard."

Merlin sighed, "But he did what he wanted anyway. Uther was like a blind bull: powerful, single-minded and," Merlin shrugged, "stupid."

Morgan gasped at the last comment. Such disrespect for a chieftain, even by an advisor, was unheard of.

But Merlin continued without hesitation. "Lust is the only thing that can completely addle the mind, Morgan. Remember that." He punctuated his slight digression with a swallow of wine.

"Uther contrived to travel to Dumnonia and be with your mother while your father battled with the Irish on Dumnonia's distant western front. During that fight, Rica was killed."

Morgan hugged herself a little. "I remember being awakened by the noise of horses. And yelling. And crying. I remember when my mother told me he was dead." Then, suddenly, she asked, "Was it contrived...h-his death?"

"Not to my knowledge, Morgan. But who can really say. Destiny has its own ways...and often has strange servants." He sighed resignedly. "Do you remember moving to Gwent three months later?"

"Yes," Morgan whispered.

"Your mother was already pregnant." He watched Morgan steadily. "There was much doubt about whose baby it was, but it was Uther's."

"How do you know?"

"I believed your mother." He gave her a tight smile. "But many didn't. News of the child ruined even the old bonds between *cantrefs* . Everybody took sides and either way, either father,the child was in danger. Those who were angered by the wrong done Rica, and who believed the child to be Uther's, wanted an end to Uther's line and any claim to supreme rule. Those in support of Uther and who believed the child to be Rica's feared the vengeance his child might later seek. Many worried that the child, if a boy, would claim both *cantrefs* as his to rule, bringing to ruin both Dumnonia and Gwent. More simply, everyone saw the coming child as ill-omened: a dry rot that would bring everything down if not cut out."

"S-so it was said he died at birth?"

Merlin nodded slowly.

"By you?"

In answer, he gazed down at his hands and rubbed one thumb with another. Morgan took several ragged breaths. "Where is he?"

"Arthur is fostered with a friend of mine. An admirable warrior."

"Arthur..." Morgan tried the name on her tongue.

"Yes, Arthur. His foster-father is honour-bound to a chieftain in the west - one of his *teulu* . Arthur is receiving an excellent and valuable education in his hands. Yet no one knows who the boy really is."

Slowly Morgan stood, absently brushing the straw from her skirt, and turned toward the hide-covered doorway. She walked up to it, pulled the hide back and gazed out at the quiet day. Directly before her stood the heart of the fortress, the temple, its timber walls and latticed roof of pine boughs brightened by the morning sun as though still thick with the sap of life. And below, the surrounding ground, trodden to grey dust in the patterns of devotion, joyously burst forth with random clumps of celandine.

Morgan straightened her shoulders and turned back to the druid. Every line of her body was rigid and on guard again. "Why did you save him?"

Merlin seemed taken aback. "That's an odd question."

"How so?" Morgan's green eyes were shards of glass.

"Well..." He rose to come and stand beside her, his slender build accentuating his height so that he appeared almost twice as tall as she. "It's not the first thing I expected you to ask. And, it's a question I should think you'd naturally know the answer to."

Merlin smiled at her frown. "Because, my dear, Arthur's my blood too. My uncle's son. And like you, the only real family I have left alive."

With this, Morgan's suspicion and resolve finally surrendered. As her tears fell, she whispered, "And I can help him?"

Merlin brushed her cheek with his thumb. "Your marriage will help protect him," he assured her softly. "It would ally Arthur to the Chieftain of Rheged, a powerful friend should Arthur ever choose to declare himself Uther's son. Those who wish your brother ill have not disappeared, Morgan."

Swallowing hard, Morgan pulled away from the druid slightly. "I want to see him."

"Yes, Morgan. You will. Your destiny weaves you ever closer to him." He took her face in his hands, his words honeyed wine. "Now you must take your part in this family again, and everything will unfold as it should."

Behind their embrace, unseen, a spear of sunlight pierced the eye of Modron, splitting the peaceful countenance into black and white.

when wailing from the womb   a boy was brought of Ygraine

Merlin first desired   to choke the life that
clamouring would deafen all   to his dreams   but Merlin
nephew and son of two high chieftains   his fingers
poised to seal the nostrils and throat   held Arthur   the
only other   nephew and son hesitantly   his druidic
training insisting on careful consideration   and he saw
that if the tribes forbid   a druid's claim to king
likely though it seared his heart   then Arthur aptly
devised would   prove expedient   or if he could persuade
neglect   and win against tradition   then death   with
its irrevocable song   was always   easily begot

Alder

Tree of Battle

Drawing his horse up, the solitary rider paused. A wind had risen with the setting sun and it pulled long strands of blond hair out from behind his hood. For a moment the only motion was the mount's tail flicking at the ceaseless flapping of the man's cloak against its flanks. Then slowly, the man brushed the hair from his eyes and leaned down to pat the coal black neck.

"Easy, now. Easy. If it pleases the gods, we'll both be warm and fed shortly", he whispered to the quivering ear. Sitting back up he nudged his horse to continue up the narrow, overgrown trail. Crisp leaves, torn by the swelling wind, rattled through the crowd of hazel, ash and oak on either side of him as, ploddingly, man and horse approached a break in the forest where dense growth became a slice of cleared land, and the stream which they followed veered to the east along the curve of the valley. As the path opened to reveal the gentle incline of a hill, tall grass, now winter brown, gave way to terraced flats of sheared, straw needles which pierced through the frosted ground. On top of the hill, was a rare sight: a homestead.

During his five days and nights of travel, the rider had made contact with only one other person, unless one counted a brief and distant sighting of what appeared to be a trader who drove his horse and pack animal into tangled thickets of hawthorn to avoid a possibly deadly encounter with a stranger on a darkening, seldom used road. The rider was more wary of chance meetings with bears or wolves which would slice through him in their hunger for horse flesh.

All British roads were seldom travelled now. Continual wars with the Saxons and bouts of plague had seriously depleted the population, so that where once grand Roman villas teeming with agricultural trade stretched lazily over rich farmland, and towns fluttering with international colour and sound feared nothing under the protection of Roman garrisons, there was now only the threat of open field or murky forest. Sparsely dotted with the walled homesteads of freeborn landowners, or the even rarer village huddled on tenanted land next to the defended fortress of a chieftain or noble, the British countryside was a lonely, desultory confrontation.

From the bottom of the hill, where the rider paused again, all that could be seen of the homestead was an oval bank shored up with timber and stone, which enclosed the dwellings, and, rising above, the smoke from chimneys which puffed, thinned and fled into the purpling sky.

The trail leading up to the homestead circled round to the east, away from the rapidly fading light. As the rider guided his horse to start the ascent, the north side of the hill came into view, a nipped and patchy grazing area. On it and slightly above him was a man guiding his herd of cattle home.

"Ho, good freeman!," the rider called.

Halting at the call, his cattle still ambling their way up the hill, the man looked back and down.

The rider waved. "I beg your hospitality this night."

British rules of courtesy insisted that a stranger who came to your door must be supplied with food, drink and shelter before any inquiries about his person could be made. But these were treacherous times.

Politely, the rider held his mount still.

The herdsman's features were barely discernable in the dusk. So too was the slight nod which granted permission.

With a relieved sigh, the rider followed his host up and then through the narrow entrance in the thick, low wall around the compound. Inside were two small, circular, timber houses with conical thatched roofs; two rectangular buildings for animals and the storage of crops; a kiln, the singluar stone sentinel between houses and buildings, and a pen where a sow and her piglets watched the passing hooves. The cattle headed into the longer of the two buildings and only when the last was secured inside did the herdsman turn and speak.

"You may secure your horse in here, stranger"'. His tone was formal and he used the proper, hospitable form of address. "The well's around behind that house, "he continued, "if you want to wash. The evening meal should be ready now. When you're ready," he motioned to the second house, "come in."

A short while later the rider stood alone outside the house to which he had been directed. Family noises, a jumble of squeals and questions, protests and instructions, came pleasantly out from behind the hide covered doorway along with the aroma of hearty food. His hood was down now, but the dark obscured the brilliant gold of his hair. Thoughtfully, he tugged at one long strand. Then, with a sigh, he ducked under the low entrance.

Cautiously, the family rose: father, mother, several children, an old couple who got up more slowly, and a young man who helped the pregnant woman beside him. All had been seated on the ground around the firepit, passing bowls of some hot, thick stew to one another, ladled out by the mother from the cauldron hanging above the coals. Now they stared at his hair, at his height, and fear crossed their faces. The two men slid their knives from the sheaths at their belts.

"Stranger," the herdsman now used the other, more hostile word of address which meant *from a distant country* rather than *distant countryman* , "what is your business here?"

As he had before, the stranger spoke in clear, pure British. "Have no fear, gentle host. I am not the enemy I appear. I was raised by my mother and her kin in Brycheiniog."

The man shook his head unbelieving, "You're Briton? You look like the very son of Oden."

His children crept over to cling to the skirt~~s~~ of their mother, except for one, a boy of about twelve who moved forward now, brazenly, before his father's warning hand could stop him.

"You get out of here right now," the boy ordered. "There's three of us here who can fight and only one of you so don't think you can try any of your cowardly Saxon tricks on us!"

"Gawry," his mother spoke softly looking not at her son but at the stranger who stood in the glow of her hearth, "let us hear his explanation."

"He can talk," the younger man insisted, "after he gives over his knife." He motioned to his guest to unfasten the sheath on his belt and toss it in front of him.

His eyes flickering briefly at the discarded weapon, the host continued to study the stranger. "You're not dressed like a Saxon, that's true. You'd be wearing filthy skins. Not that fine wool tunic. And you'd smell."

"And," the woman interjected, "he *has* a British tongue. No one can learn it faultless except at his mother's knee."

Looking from one shadowed face to another, the stranger finally answered, "I am called Taliesin. I was recently made bard at the circle of Elffin and I travel to my patron, Uryen of Rheged. I have proof of this, as I'm sure you will require. I can tell by the lavishness of your homestead," Taliesin gestured towards the door, "that you must be an important man in this area and I did not expect you to take such a claim lightly."

The host nodded grudgingly, "I am spokesman for the tribe that makes up the majority of families farming in this area. It is a free *tref* , and we pay our food tribute to Uryen.

Taliesin gave a slight smile, "I thought..." his smile grew somewhat wider, "well, at least I'd hoped I'd travelled into Rheged by now. Perhaps you could tell me how many days journey I have left before reaching the chieftain's hearth."

"I could," the man did not return Taliesin's smile, "but perhaps you could prove who you are first."

Taliesin held the man's gaze for a moment and then answered softly, "My proof is in the Telling. I will say for you a glory- chant or a recounting. Or make a new tale...of my journey if you like."

The woman moved first, slowly disentangling herself from the children, leaning towards the steaming cauldron, ladelling out some stew into another clay bowl. Her husband gave her a cautionary look which she ignored. "There's a bonded *tref*, with its village, nasty as it is, that will take you till the night after next to reach. Sit here," she pointed to a place on the straw covered ground and passed the bowl to him, "you'll likely sleep on the frost tomorrow night so you might as well take your comfort now."

The rest of the family slowly followed her initiative and took their seats again by the fire.

"You're seven nights from Uryen's *maerdref* , Caer Ysgrifennu," she continued, "but the town of Carlisle's less of a ride. That's where you'll find him this time of year, collecting his food tribute."

With a stick she poked at the coals to rouse them, then she sat down herself. "So, tomorrow morning my husband will show you how to find the best road. And now," she finally smiled at him, "you will Tell."

A chorus of eager assent came from the family.

"Yes, yes,...Glory-chant," the boy demanded huskily.

moon bleached bones   wind-caught under pillars of dust
lie still   on verdant meadows   villas   once vital
with roman voice   now dismembered and silent   their

decorated halls defiled   by those who were abandoned
hastily pulled apart to secure another place   where no
place was   I stood   inside one broken backed skeleton
angular emptiness prone across a briton valley   and
saw its long cornered caverns   home once to a hundred
hollow and dark   shards of tile shattered   blocks of
stone broken   and softened   moss cloaked mosaics
where once magistrates stood for rome   everywhere the
sharp edge grown dull   and I recalled that angles only
define   endings

Raw light blanching the chill air, the day began deceitfully, promising a clear day for travel when ahead in the east pregnant clouds foretold an early snow.

Morgan watched those clouds, absorbing their sullenness, and found herself resenting even the small demands of a thin wind and damp air. She pulled her cloak tightly around her and left her place by the fire, impatient with its cheeriness. The others, eager to gain the day and resume their journey, were gathering to pack the horses. Morgan walked the other way.

Her husband called after her, but she ignored him. She had spent a sleepless night beside him, his child heavy inside her, her thoughts heavier still, and had risen before the dawn to walk away her discontent. She could not walk far enough. Nothing could ease the hollow ache that was becoming her constant companion. Again.

She had first felt it return, briefly, when she met the man she was to marry: Uryen, Chieftain of Rheged, a black bear of a man who prowled beside his Advisor and appraised her with a snarl. "She's not much to look at," he had said.

And it returned again during that first night under him. Her response was to allow the flurry of a new way of life to obscure the sense that she'd chosen something terribly wrong. Yet a year had passed and her mysterious brother was still only a story she could not tell, while she existed in this freezing place supposedly helping him. And now there was a child to hold her here too.

To stall any tears, Morgan turned to face the rising wind, its icy strands searing her cheeks, and saw the tiresomely familiar form of Enhinti coming after her.

"My Lady! It is too cold for you to wander far. You will get sick, and the baby..."

Enhinti. Bound by the gods, it seemed, to follow her everywhere. Morgan let out a long, audible sigh. Why this woman had taken such an interest in her was beyond Morgan's understanding. The woman was wealthy in her own right, having recently acquired some land and twenty or thirty head of cattle in one of Rheged's free *trefs* , but preferred to live with her kinsman, a man who had joined Uryen's teulu not long after Morgan's marriage, and devote herself to Morgan. She did not act the part of a servant, yet she took far more interest in Morgan's well being than any of the other wives or kinswomen, who tended to their own lives first. Maybe, Morgan thought as she watched the comfortably round figure approach her, Enhinti considered herself far better intentioned. She was certainly often smug.

"PLease, My Lady. Only Evnyssen knows why you are trying for trouble."

The troublemaker god. No doubt Enhinti was well acquainted with his methods. Morgan folded her arms across her chest.

"I have not asked Evnyssen nor any of the gods for advice on how to bring you grief, Enhinti. I only wish to be alone."

The exasperation in the other woman's tone was undisguised. "But the chieftain wishes to start out. He hopes to make Carlisle by dusk."

Carlisle. Yet one more misery in Morgan's life. Her first few months as a married woman had been spent there last winter and she would never have believed a place could be so alien. Built by the Romans, the town was a sprawling web of blocks and intersecting streets where everything followed an unbending path or ended abruptly in a harsh angle. Nothing yielded, felt warm or rustled under step on its constantly clattering cobbled streets. Even though it had been a hundred winters since Roman governors gilded its streets, despite the scars inflicted by the ransacking British who were left behind and desperate to defend themselves, regardless of the poverty and neglect that had settled on its thinly populated remains, Carlisle was still thoroughly Roman in character. And Morgan hated it. But traditionally every winter the chieftain of Rheged and his retinue resided there, bringing the otherwise forlorn area a measure of commerce. Last winter every corner of Carlisle made her cry for the soft symmetry of Avalon.

"My Lady, the chieftain demands you return."

This winter, she knew, would be worse.

hot in Uryen's blood ten battle lords   campaigned yet
no man better made for war   where desire's only name
was victory   he trusted the grasp of his own arms and eyes
and doubted always the flash of words   hence he gauged
Merlin's aim suspiciously   but Morgan sister-in-law to Lot
would ally Rheged to that northern chief   and make
the border twice as strong   so Uryen ever roused by
Rheged's need   bedded his best defense

Morgan would watch one snowflake and then another as it dwindled and fell, united and disappeared. There was nothing else to look at: grey sky met grey land, white shrouds bordered black trees, and ahead the mud drenched trail melted into the opaque light.

Morgan could feel the strain of the half-day ride in her shoulders and spine, and stretched, or tried to, rubbing the small of her back. Soon she would demand a rest stop even though it might mean that they would not reach Carlisle before dusk. A short journey in the dark wouldn't hurt them as much as this monotonous pain did her now.

Just then, to her surprise, Uryen raised his hand to signal a halt. Snowflakes stuck briefly in his beard, then dissolved under the heat of his breath.

"We'll stop awhile at the cross roads just over the next rise to give the women a chance to rest." He looked expressionlessly at Morgan. Then he waved the party on and waited as they rode past until Morgan came up beside him.

"You don't look well."

"I'm not."

"I didn't think you were far enough along to need a litter."

"I don't."

"I think once we turn south the weather will clear, so don't worry."

"I won't."

Uryen stiffened and glared at her. "I see you've grown no less miserable with the progress of the day."

"No less miserable, no." She met his eyes, daring him to stay beside her.

He held her gaze briefly and then, nudging his horse, rode quickly back up to the head of the group.

As always, Morgan felt only relief at his leaving. It was not that he was a bad man, in fact Morgan knew he was quite the contrary. Praised by all in Rheged for his fair and honest nature, he treated Morgan with no less rectitude despite his obvious disappointment in her. At first Morgan thought that displeasure was because she was not beautiful. Uryen hungered for luscious women as though they were food. But later she realized that he was upset more by her nature. She was not the contented, quiet, maternal helpmate with whom he could have been, for practical reasons, reconciled. Nor was she the pragmatic, quick-thinking strategist with whom he could have shared his concerns and victories. The problem was that they did not think or feel alike in any way: he the warrior who guided life with his own hand, and she the priestess who longed for the touch of the goddess. One day, Morgan thought, she might be able to feel as sorry for Uryen as she did for herself.

They did not bother to light a fire, but they brought out some bread and cheese and beer from the packs and had a small meal, standing up because everywhere the ground was wet. Everyone was too damp and weary to engage in much talk, but Enhinti as usual looked eager to chat. Morgan moved out of the woman's range as discretely as possible and found herself wandering down the new road, which led south.

Because the sleet had lessened and fewer trees crowded the way, she could actually see down this trail. In such hilly country the road was oddly flat, even straight, yet it did not narrow to some elusive point in the forest. Instead, the dark-taloned oak and elm evaporated into a wide doorway of fine, transluscent mist. Perhaps, she mused, it was a magical entrance to the Otherworld where gods and brave warriors feasted at an endless table laden with roast boar, salmon and song birds, and where men and women danced to a never ending song of laughter and life.

As if formed from Morgan's thoughts, the murky shape of a rider appeared behind the mist. Morgan blinked, trying to re-establish the road and the trees, but the rider was not part of her dream. The mists parted and a man and horse emerged, whisps of fog clinging to them, the horse's mane black as the pre-dawn, the man's hair golden as the full sun.

Morgan took a few steps backward, nervously looking over her shoulder to relocate her party. She had not come that far, had she? The rider called out to her and she was torn between the decision to run or stand her ground. Surely if she called out the others could hear her.

Very near now, he pulled his horse up and spoke again, but it didn't matter what he said, or how far away the others were, or what she should do, because in his eyes she saw the forest, the sweet wild temple of Avalon, and the common ground of the gods. Then she heard him say his name, *Taliesin* , as though it were a song.

firespun   bronze bright I saw her   steadfast   in the
howling white of winter's day   discord surrounding her
Morgan   daughter of Dumnonia and Powys   wife to
Rheged   rounded with new life watching my entrance   I
knew her too as Morgan bandrui of Avalon   her ancient
knowledge as powerful as her blood   yet her eyes were flat
held fast   against the secrets we shared   shaded
like fathomless pools   when the forest waits for night

Behind the scraggly tufts of juniper which grew on the crest of the hill, five young men lay on their bellies in the slippery bracken, enduring without comment the heavy rain pelting their soaked backs and legs. Kei, marginally the oldest but the leader more because of his size, wiped the water from his eyes, slicked his hair back off his forehead and rubbed in irritation at the rivulet that ran from the ends of his hair down the back of his neck to the ground.

"I can hardly see the herd in this cursed downpour," the youth next to Kei hissed. "By Evnyssen, no raid's worth dying of the fever. We should go back."

Kei gave him a black look. "Hold your place, Cymric. One undisciplined fool in this party's more than enough." He nodded unnecessarily in the direction of their youngest member who alone and against orders had begun to creep forward through the muck and the weedy undergrowth.

The boy, for at thirteen he was still that, was Kei's foster brother and this was his first cattle raid. Though the boy was a year older than most youths when they went on their first raid, Kei and the others had protested taking him along. They argued with their elders that because the boy was habitually reckless and overconfident, taking him would be more of a hazard than a way for him to learn anything. Yet Kei's father, Ector, insisted, saying the boy would benefit from some kind of practical experience.

Cattle raids against a homestead in a neighbouring *cantref* were the favourite sport of young Britons during times when no real battles could occupy them, and were considered good tactical exercises. No ill will between *cantrefs* was ever incurred by these thefts unless blood was shed; the loss was simply recovered by a counter-raid.

Kei and the other three youths considered themselves among the best raiders in Gwynedd, having successfully attacked homesteads in Powys, Ceredigion and even as far away as Dyfed. And they were good. Clever, bold and instinctive, they already had the makings of warriors fit for a *teulu*. Their appraisal of Kei's foster brother was fair as well. No one would rank the boy with equal potential.

Kei nudged Cymnric and whispered sharply, "Tell him to halt!"

The message was passed down the line, but the boy kept slithering his way forward.

Below them in a rocky gully, in clear sight of the homestead perched on the opposite hill, grazed twenty head of cattle. Kei's plan had been to use the cover of the downpour to assess the grazing area at a closer range than he otherwise would have dared, but because the lowland area was so narrow and the hill opposite somewhat higher than the one they were on, they still had to stay behind what protection the juniper could offer to avoid being seen from the compound.

"Stop him!" Kei ordered, louder this time, and the fourth in line grabbed hold of the boy's feet.

"Idiot," Kei seethed under his breath as he scrambled over to the struggling pair. The boy was trying to kick his way free from the other's grasp and now they were both using their fists.

Kei solved the problem by landing, full weight, on top the boy and flattening him to the ground. He grabbed the boy's shoulders and shoved them into the muck.

"Arthur! By all the gods, I swear I'll drag you back to camp and tie you to a tree if you so much as breathe again before I tell you to." In answer Arthur only sneered.

Kei bounced him off the ground again. "I mean it! Uncle or no uncle, I'll leave you out of all of this. Now get back down there with the others."

The uncle to whom Kei referred was Arthur's mysterious benefactor who was known only to Kei's father and Arthur. Quite suddenly a few years ago, this uncle began contacting Arthur and inviting him for extended visits. The only result of these visits as far as anyone could tell was to turn a somewhat slow-witted but otherwise tolerable boy into a self-inflated monster. And worse, Ector contributed to the problem by insisting that Arthur be allowed exception after exception because, he explained, the uncle demanded only the best for the boy. Kei didn't understand his father's subservience to a man no one ever saw, or his praise for Arthur's mediocrity which, if he'd found it in Kei, he would have beaten out of him.

After another brief stand-off, Arthur finally relented and crept back to his position. As soon as he was in place Kei immediately ignored him and resituated himself to concentrate on the problem of how to capture the herd.

They debated: On horseback they could manage an even larger herd easily by closing them off and driving them out, but this time the grazing area was a gully - too narrow to accomodate more than one rider, and that was if any rider could get a horse down the rocky, unstable slope quickly enough not to be noticed. Or, they could send one rider in from the north where the gully widened into meadow, but that was at least a league off and the other four would have to wait in that meadow, unable to see or help the solo raider until he returned to open land. The risk of being caught was considerable; still, so would be the thrill of success.

"I have the fastest horse," one of the youths announced, "so I should be the one to ride in."

"And when did you get a new horse?"

Kei shook his head at both of them. "Look. We need two of us to create a diversion. One for a look-out. And --"

Scrambling sideways down the slope to the cattle, slipping and scraping against the mossy stones that littered the way, Arthur was a good quarter of the way down before the others noticed him.

"Hey!-" Cymric started to leap up after him, but Kei pulled him back down.

"Let him go! All of you stay where you are!"

Cymric shook his head and gestured wildly, "By Lugh's spear! What does he think he's doing? We have to stop him. He'll be seen!"

Kei grabbed him by the sleeve of his tunic and hauled him back down. "I said let him," he growled. "Maybe if the pest is caught and given a good beating, he'll think twice before he acts the next time."

"But Kei, if that freeman sees Arthur, he's not going to just come running down his trail waving a stick at the boy. He's going to know Arthur isn't alone." Cymric looked desperately at Kei, and the others echoed him. There they were: unhorsed, far from camp, lying in the mud, with no decent plan or clever escape, caught like children at a silly game. None of them could tolerate the double shame of being thwarted and looking like fools.

Halfway down Arthur slipped, knocking some small stones free. Crackling, spitting, the loose rocks startled the cattle as they bounced and rolled into the gully. A few of the cows started to low a warning.

Kei looked from one face to another. "Then we leave. Now."

Though he did not look as if he objected, the youth who had fought with Arthur asked, "You mean leave him behind?"

"He knows his way back to the camp. They'll let him go later."

Without waiting for further comment, Kei began to struggle, still on his stomach, backward the way they had come. He had to get far enough down the hill to be able to stand without being seen. Cymric was the one who hesitated.

Arthur reached the bottom, stumbled once more in the slippery grass and then as soon as he recovered started to run at the cattle, clapping his hands, slapping them on the hind quarters, urging them to move in the direction of the distant meadow.

"He's an idiot," Cymric said aloud to himself when, just as he was preparing to follow his companions, he saw a man come out of the homestead. Then another. And another.

"Kei! We're too late. They've seen him."

The first herdsman took after Arthur at a dead run. A burly man with shortish legs, he might not have been able to catch the boy if Arthur had headed for open land. Instead, confirming his inability to think under pressure, Arthur ran for the hillside.

The other two herdsmen beat Arthur to the slope and surprisingly scrambled to get ahead of him.

"They know we're here," Cymric hollered and started to run towards the others. "Two of them," he panted, sliding sideways, hands and feet in the wet braken.

On the other side of the hill Arthur tried to keep the advantage of distance between himself and his pursuer, but the rocks kept slipping from under him, the grass sliding from his grasp, and for every two steps gained he lost one. Behind him, hardly panting for all his bulk, the man climbed unrelentingly, undaunted by the shower of pebbles and earth, or the cold clear rain streaming down.

Arthur found a hand's width of granite jutting out of the hillside just above his head and without testing it pulled hard for leverage. It popped out of the earth like an eye from a socket and Arthur tumbled, screaming, backwards and down. He fell hard against the herdsman sending both rolling into an outcropping of juniper and rock near the bottom. Stones ricocheted past their heads as the two grappled, Arthur trying to get up to flee and the herdsman grabbing for any purchase on Arthur's legs, ankles and feet. Finally the herdsman had a good hold and yanked Arthur back. Arthur bounced along the rough ground face down, in that brief moment seemingly beaten, but as the herdsman threw him over onto his back Arthur raised his right arm, found another rock, and struck out.

Without a sound the herdsman fell, flat, limp, like a broken cocoon. There was hardly any blood, just a small slice of red open above his eye.

Arthur pulled himself out from under the man and stood, expressionless, staring down at him. Absently he let go of the rock. Then, without touching the man, without even crouching down to look more closely at the wound or check for breath, Arthur simply turned and fled.

Kei, Cymric and the other two youths were having to fight harder than one would expect with the odds in their favour, but the cattle owners were big men and determined to forge a lesson in their hides as much as chase them off. The conflict was far from decided when Arthur appeared, breathless, at the top of the hill.

One of the herdsmen was the first to notice him and, distracted, he took a blow to the small of his back that sent him to his knees. When his companion, who should have been panting close behind Arthur, did not appear, it seemed his strength was doubled and he reared up roaring, smashing the oncoming Kei in the chest and pushing past him to make his way towards Arthur. The boy froze and cried out to Kei. Over Arthur the herdsman bellowed for his companion. And again. And rushed right past Arthur to see down the other side of the hill.

The herdsman's break from the fight, his calls, roused the others and when he yelled out once more, a sharp tearing sound, the third herdsman broke free too, running to join him in his frantic scramble down the slope.

Kei, Cymric and the others reached Arthur, saw the fallen man too, and Kei grabbed hold of Arthur's arm. "What happened?" he barked.

Tearing his arm free, Arthur shook his head. "We have to get away!"

Kei turned his attention back to the herdsmen crouched over their fellow behind a curtain of rain.

Now Arthur pulled at Kei. "They'll be on us like dogs in another moment."

Savagely Kei grabbed him. "Why? What--"

"He's dead." Arthur spat the words in Kei's face. "I hit him, that's all. And he's dead. Now let's go!"

Letting go of the boy slowly, Kei began to back away. "You drew blood?" His question was almost a whisper.

"He's dead, I told you." Arthur glanced nervously at the rising forms in the gully.

"Arthur," Cymric interjected, a hard edge in his voice, "if that's true then we must stay here and face them. It's a matter of *honour*."

A look of absolute fear and desperation flashed in Arthur's face. Alone the boy was helpless. He couldn't have found his way home on his own, wouldn't have been able to keep his deed secret even if he did. The accusations would arrive before him. Cymric's reaction meant that his companions would not shield him, would not hide him or lie for him. They were going to stand firm, honour bound to the blood price, give their names and their lives in respect for the vengeance that was the injured family's right.

And something of what Arthur had been secretly taught burst into life. "Kei," he warned, "If I don't arrive back home safely, your father won't see another nightfall."

The resolve in Kei's eyes flickered.

"I can promise you, my uncle would not forget who was *responsible* for me being here."

Kei started to raise his fist and then stopped, his anger caught and cornered by fear. Arthur was compromising every bit of his warrior training, forcing him to choose between his honour and his blood kin. Both of which he was sworn to protect with his life. But Arthur's sudden show of power, and the viciousness of it trapped him.

His indecision lasted only a moment. Quickly, Kei slapped Cymric on the shoulder and ordered through gritted teeth, "Let's go!"

Cymric looked at him in horror.

"Your father's any safer?" Kei demanded.

And all five of them began to run. They reached their horses barely ahead of their pursuers, abandoned everything in the camp and galloped at breakneck speed through the winding, mountainous countryside.

Much later, when the grey light of day shimmered into the mauve and pink of evening, when the rain had ceased, Arthur rode up next to Kei and said, "None but us need ever know. Your honour's safe with me." And in the twilight four youths shivered in a dank wind.

beyond the firelit sacrifice   flesh-scented sparks
snapping lynx-eyed in the dark   we feasted   that night

in Alder when   the moon holds brief parity with the sun
—more to honour renewal   than to herald retreat   that
destined time for which the fires flamed   when regal night
withers   in the face of raging day   an auspicious month
for the son of a chieftain to appear   Alder   tree of
battle   claimed Owein   and Uryen raised his cup to this
new life   sure of its promised glory   all forgot the
druid's blood-filled bowls of sacrifice   drunk as we were
on consanguinity   our concerns knew not the season's
change   the sure decline of night into day   neglectful
were we of the need for death   to renew life   nor could
we see in that waning time the foreshadow   of another
conquering son   who would forever banish celtic night

During the year after her son was born, Morgan was apparently happy and settled. Gone were her moody tempers, her tear-filled walks, her demands for solitude, and everyone agreed that she had finally matured. Owein certainly contributed to her new contentment. She spoke often of how the demanding beautiful life of her son brought her new meaning and vision. Still there was another contributing factor that nobody paid much attention to, and that was that her happiness was in direct porportion to the amount of time she spent with Taliesin.

With him, Morgan found kinship for the first time since leaving Avalon, kinship in the bard's intellect, experience and faith. She thrilled to the recounting of his divine confirmation, revelled in being able to talk about her own, and took consolation in the company of someone who felt as isolated as she.

However, it was also apparent to anyone who had eyes that Morgan was in love with her husband's new bard. She spent as much time as possible with him, usually alone, and whenever they were together in a group she watched his every breath. But she must have wondered why in the year since her child was born, Taliesin had never directed any physical affection towards her, never so much as reached out to touch her. He allowed and even appeared to take pleasure in her signs of affection, when she took his hand or hugged him or put an arm around him; but he did not reciprocate. Taliesin remained a man alone, granting only the intimacy of words.

And that was what was really behind the lack of concern shown by Uryen and the rest of the community. Their indifference did not reflect on Morgan: it made obvious what they thought of Taliesin.

Of course every bard had the respect of his patron and those who sat at the chieftain's hearth, and Taliesin was certainly accorded such. No one could ignore the mystery of a bard's creative powers, to be able to call up all of British history on his tongue, to make it breathe again in his songs, to craft new stories from the deeds of living men so that they might live forever too. And no one ever forgot the mystery of his training, the nine isolated years of instruction and the secret journey to the gods' own well of inspiration to be reborn from their words. Then too, Taliesin at the tender age of twenty was already spoken of as being one of the most gifted bards to sing at any hearth. No, as a bard Taliesin definitely had everyone's respect. It was as a man that he drew no attention.

Although he was uncommonly handsome, Taliesin had a meandering gentleness to him, long soft lines to his body and features that implied a lack of power or determination. He was not effeminate in any way; his masculinity not dismissed so much as absent. He was merely inoffensive and strangely mild. His only provoking aspect was his Saxon colouring and even that was, after first notice, soon overshadowed by his oddly reflective and decidely private nature. The only potency that anyone could discern in Taliesin came from his words, and words did not worry any warrior, much less Uryen.

Uryen settled himself under the furs of their bed, the cold whispering around the room, clinging to dark corners. Outside their room the rest of the crumbling Roman house Uryen claimed for a hall while living in Carlisle was a black tunnel of marble, barren and hard. Voices were drawn into tortuous echoes around its columns, along its tiles, the emptiness swallowing up all substance and depth of sound.

Morgan turned from the polished copper mirror, loosening the last plait of her hair and studied her husband. "You can't mean that, Uryen."

He drew one arm back behind his head and answered casually, "They're just words. He may be one of the best but not he nor any poet is worth half of the warrior he commends in his pretty songs. A poet only recounts what they do. Imitates it. Without the original deed, what would he have to say?"

As always Morgan felt utterly disconnected from this man and wondered how to talk to him. "You can't deny the power of a bard's words. Regardless of what you or any chieftain does, it's how he tells it that will determine how others will speak of you across time."

"After the act." Uryen made a fist, raising it to cast an enormous shadow in the lamplight. "The act must happen first. And it remains." He drew himself up on one shoulder and glared at her. "He tells history. I create it."

Morgan stared into Uryen's eyes for several long moments.

He was not just being stubborn. She could see it there, beyond the liquid earth shade. He was convinced. She hesitated a moment longer and then added softly, "And that's all there is? Words can't help you, or hurt you? Taliesin says there is nothing more powerful...that words create truth."

Uryen looked disgusted. "Nonsense."

Morgan turned back to the mirror and picked up her comb. Carved from boar's tusk, its high rounded back was an ornate lattice work of spirals which glowed warmly in the lamplight. It had been a gift from Uryen for her constantly tangled curls.

"Come to bed."

She put the comb back down on the wooden chest and studied his reflection, distant and distorted by the curve of the plate. "I'm not tired."

"Neither am I."

Morgan's stomach knotted. Not tonight, she thought. I don't want you inside me tonight.

"Owein wasn't feeling well when Enhinti took him off to bed. I want to look in on him first." And without facing him she walked out of the room into the chill of the hall.

Even her third winter here had not made her feel any less alienated by this building the Romans had called a house. It had belonged to a magistrate and so it was large enough for the *teulu* to meet, even though it had no decent area for a firepit and cauldron, no places on the walls where battle trophies could easily be hung, and no warm earth floors on which to sit.

As she walked aimlessly past the marble and murals, past the broken tile and scarred surfaces, she found herself in the very area she disliked the most, the inner courtyard where the *teulu* feasted every night and listened to the songs of their bard.

Morgan shivered and looked up at the stars and the night. No moon. Even the comfort of Her cream light was absent from this place.

"She's off gathering her strength."

The soft voice didn't startle Morgan. She knew it too well. "Who is, Taliesin?"

The bard stepped out of the shadow cast by one of the large columns which flanked the garden area, his hair holding a light of its own. "The moon. Sometimes you have to retreat in order to advance."

Morgan laughed. "You sound like a druid." How her mood could change, she marvelled, just by looking at him. "Where were you sitting? I didn't see you. And besides," she walked over to where he stood and slipped her arm in under his, "isn't your performance long over? What are you still doing here?"

He laughed back. "Do you want to join me?" He motioned to a place further in the darkness.

They made their way around the low tables that had been set up for the feast, across the marble floor to the central small square of earth that had once perhaps been lush and now held a hastily built fire pit. Some of the coals still glowed with a subtle warmth and the two of them sat down nearby on the damp ground covered with Taliesin's cloak. Though both wore fur vests they shivered and tried to rouse the coals to more life.

"I thought you'd be long asleep."

"Uryen and I got talking. Honestly Tay, I don't know why I try." She searched his face for sympathy, but he kept his attention on the fire.

"We were talking about the power of words."

Taliesin raised an eyebrow and gave her a bemused smile.

"I know. I know." She grinned back.

Wrapping her arms around her legs, Morgan rested her chin on her knees and enjoyed for a moment the comfortable silence between them. "Tay..."

"Ummm?" He was sitting easily too, legs crossed, hands resting on his ankles.

"If words create truth, then is there never any real truth in them?"

"Oh Morgan, what a question." He looked so sad as he shook his head. "I don't know. That's the question I would give my life to know, really know the answer to. Is there any real truth?" He rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Doubt...doubt, Morganna, is the greatest curse of all."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"That's because you don't have it. Doubt."

She started to protest.

He cut her off. "No. You believe there is truth in the gods, don't you? In their words? Prophecy. Revelation."

"Well of course."

"Of course," he shrugged. "So you have absolute truth in divine words, and then you have the capriciousness of our mortal ones. Unfortunately there's always the problem of translating the divine through mortal mouths. Still, you have your answer, Morganna."

"But not yours."

He ignored the consolation in her tone. "You're not alone. Many different people believe the same thing. The Christians for example believe that their god is also the perfect word --"

"I'm sorry Tay," she interrupted. "I don't care what some minor cult believes or doesn't."

"They're not so minor in some parts of the world."

"Well they are here. Anyway, I do care about what you believe. And about what hurts you." Morgan reached across to lightly brush the hair back from his face. "This doubt. It's new."

"No."

The mildness of his voice and the pain in his eyes made her feel suddenly awkward and embarrassed because she realized he was telling her the most personal thing he ever had. And she couldn't really understand what it was.

"Morgan, no. Don't ask me anything more about this. You don't need to know how it is that you have a touchstone and I don't. Just marvel in the fact that you do."

At this she raised her hand to caress his cheek, to wipe away the tear she thought she saw, and the love she felt for this man was as sharp as pain.

And then for the first time he moved towards her, grasping her hand and cupping it against his mouth, kissing the centre of her palm with lips so hot they seared her skin.

Letting go of thought, Morgan slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. The taste of him was sweet and sharp and made her hungry, so hungry. She drew back, feeling his warm breath against her upper lip, and they kissed again, drawing each other down to the earth and the soft wool of his cloak.

Desire had all of her now and she was alive only through the scent of his skin, the touch of his breath, the sound of his clothes rustling beneath her hands. She pulled at his belt and tunic: She wanted to feel more of him, have more of him, and he was with her, by all the gods he was there wanting the same thing. His mouth moved away from hers to her neck and she stretched offering skin and copper curls. She wanted to tear at the collar of her gown so he could kiss her shoulders and in between her breasts.

But his kisses stopped. She didn't care, didn't notice really. All she wanted was to have his skin next to hers. And she tried to tug at the drawstring of his braccae. He stayed her hand.

Stunned she pulled back brushing unintentionally across his groin. And then she knew, thought flooding back with the touch that could not lie: he did not want her.

"Morgan..."

She sat up quickly, straightening her clothes distractedly, wanting just to get up and run away.

"I can't, Morgan. I'm sorry."

She couldn't look at him. The tears came anyway.

"It's not that I don't care. I love you very much. I will always love you." He tried to lift her hair off her shoulder and she pulled away.

"Just...not this way. I can't this way," he finished quietly but with such firmness it frightened her.

Hurt, angry, Morgan wanted to hit him, make him tell her why.

"It's not you, Morgan. You're not the only one I've turned away."

Now she faced him because suddenly he was a stranger to her.

"What I desire, what I need will not be satisfied this way. Being with a woman only leaves me feeling lonelier." He kept his eyes steadily on her, not shying from her scrutiny. "And I don't want to feel that way with you. I don't know that

I can explain it. Just know that it has nothing to do with you. Only me. There's an ache inside me that demands love, but it cannot substitute this kind of intimacy for what it really wants. The act of love is empty for me. And it is useless...painful for me to look there. I've come to believe that no one," he touched her cheek with his finger, "no matter how loving, can ease that pain."

"You don't mean that, Tay." Morgan's anger had dissolved and the hurt she still felt was now more for him. She longed to hold him close, take away his fears.

Instead he moved away from her, rising to stand in the shadow. His voice drifted down to her on the night wind. "No matter what, my love for you remains, Morganna." As he left her to that dark garden, where chill starlight gleamed on polished stone, empty of his presence it became a Roman space once more.

A fortnight later when the spring weather had settled in, news came that tore apart Morgan's tenuous hold on contentment and would soon require her to sacrifice it altogether.

Uryen and his followers were busy packing to leave

Carlisle for the growing season and return to Caer Ysgrifennu when they were told that a messenger was requesting entrance to the town in order to see the chieftain. The group waited and watched down the long, perfectly straight main road leading south for the rider to appear. As soon as he came through the main gate and long before they could make him out clearly they could hear him, his mount's hooves clattering against the cobblestone. With each block he reined in and paused, apparently considering his position. Then seeing them he rode quickly up.

Without dismounting he asked for Uryen and then recited hurriedly, "Uryen of Rheged...you and your hearth-companions are invited to attend the acclamation of the new High Chieftain of all Britain,"

Uryen took a step forward, disbelief and anger clouding his face.

"Arthur, son of Uther, to be honoured this month of Willow at the Feast of Beltaine."

And at the mention of Uther's name, Uryen turned on Morgan.

Willow

Tree of Divination

The prophecy!

> from angry nest on wings of blood Gwent
> will soar when what was lost is risen

Nimue had been right in her cynical prediction of Merlin's ultimate purpose. The druid had used the promise of a powerful warleader for his own design and now everyone knew what had been foretold because Merlin moved to make it very clear. He and his followers declared that the prophecy must refer to Arthur since the boy was conceived out of conflict, had taken flight because of his blood, and was now returned to life. Arthur, the boy Merlin had nurtured and bound by secrets, was meant to lead Gwent to glory. And Merlin was the power behind him.

And powerful he was. With the warriors of Gwent solidly in his control, Merlin had been able to force his hand-picked chieftains on the tribes of that *cantref* for a decade. Now, apparently, he was confident enough of his influence in other *cantrefs* to insist they concede that the prophecy called for Gwent's supremacy as the seat of the *High* Chieftain. However, while the tribes of Gwent might be persuaded to accept a beardless boy as the saviour of their *cantref* , chieftains in other *cantrefs* were hardly eager to acknowledge him as their superior. Bowing to absolute authority was as distasteful to a Briton as succumbing to cowardice, especially any that reeked of Roman tradition. No one wanted another "emperor." Ambrosius had been a necessary exception during chaotic times; his brother Uther, to the contrary, proof that Britain should be governed by British systems. A claim against that family's brief interval of power was seen by many as blatantly ridiculous. Yet even here Merlin had arranged little opportunity for debate, securing ties over the years through debts of honour or marriage that now bound certain chieftains to his plan even though they would otherwise fight against it with their lives. Those bonds, however, could not nullify the anger which swept through the *cantrefs* like a plague. It seemed as though *on wings of blood* might as easily mean *how* Gwent would achieve supremacy.

Any interpretation depended, of course, on the emphasis given when the vate first spoke it. If a vate was first. Unfortunately that was a possibility that Morgan was not yet able to embrace.

Despite Merlin's obvious misuse of her trust and vulnerabilities, Morgan still would not consider the idea that Merlin had *created* the prophecy to suit his needs. The announcement about Arthur made plain that Merlin had never been concerned with either Morgan's best interests or her brother's. He had led her into marriage not to help her re-establish the family she had lost nor to protect her brother with the friendship of Rheged against the time when Arthur might choose to announce himself, but to maneuver Uryen into submitting to Arthur's rule. Merlin's rule. Still, at this point in Morgan's life she had very little understanding of the pragmatics of achieving power and how the sacred could be manipulated by the profane. Unfortunately, she was too attached to a life she no longer led. If Morgan could have questioned more, doubted the druid's commitment to the religion in which she found such strength, she might have been better prepared for the events that were to follow. Instead, her strength and her need to reaffirm it in the face of contradiction made her more vulnerable.

on blood dark trails of retreat   Uryen never felt so lamed
as by this ruthless snare   crippled to Merlin's will
with the bonds of kindred   and now he saw betrayal   in
all his wife's fierce silences   shelter he thought for her
dreams of a child chief   first her brother and then her
son   by right of his maternity an heir to Arthur's claim
and Uryen feared her blood obligations to Merlin were
stronger   than to him   yet ambushed bound and wounded
Uryen did not yield   while forced to stillness he watched
unblinking   the motions of his adversaries

Golden air wafted soft and scented over the meadow, now tender green with new growth. Lady Lile and her attendant bent repeatedly over cowslips and early orchids, selecting their perfumed harvest while early venturing wasps hung nearby suspended in the honeyed light.

"And this?" Lile asked, holding aloft a finger's length of stalk bearing a single broad leaf.

"Adder's Tongue," the young woman answered. "It is harvested during the light half of Willow when the moon is waxing so that its quality of aiding the body to retain fluids is enhanced. By the dark half of Hawthorn, as soon as the first heat of summer appears, it will all be dead."

Lile smiled at her warmly. "You may wonder why I continue to test you, Nimue. You whom I have never known to err. It is because of a simple truth: knowledge that is taken for granted is knowledge lost. What you have gained at Avalon cannot be neglected."

Nimue nodded tolerantly. "I know that, My Lady."

Lile put her arm around Nimue's shoulders. "I cannot help but feel regret over your decision to leave us. I had hoped that you would decide to stay and teach."

Nimue walked amiably enough beside her mentor. "For some time now, My Lady, I've wanted to apply my knowledge in the outside world. I believe I could...," Nimue bent over to pluck a dandelion, "accomplish more there." Methodically she squeezed the milk from the flower's stem onto her fingertips until the stalk was flattened all the way down. Then, tossing the shrunken blossom away, she smiled at Lady Lile.

"Do not doubt the validity of what you could accomplish here."

"Oh, never," she laughed, spinning away from Lile to walk backwards through the web of grasses. "I know exactly what Avalon can offer me and who knows, maybe sometime I'll choose to take it." Fleetingly, a grey shadow filled Lile's eyes. Just then from the stand of aspen which ran along the north end of the meadow a call rose up and two figures, another bandrui and what appeared to be a man, emerged.

Lile made no attempt to disguise her displeasure at having a man led so brazenly to an audience with her, but before she could speak the other bandrui explained, "My Lady, this messenger has come all the way from Morgan of Rheged."

The man dropped his head in acknowledgment, the top of his skull gleaming, and then raised his craggy face to meet hers. His leathered skin had known three lifetimes of suns and moons, and he spoke in tones long seasoned.

"Reverend Lady, I have ridden without rest to bring you the words of my mistress. May I have your permission to speak them?"

Quietly, behind Lady Lile, Nimue moved slightly closer.

Lile urged him with a curt nod and the man began:

"With all honour and love, greetings from Morgan of Rheged to Lile, Lady of the Lake, Archpriestess of Avalon. It has been with great sorrow that I have watched these two years pass without seeing you. I was told that I would adjust to my new life more quickly if I kept my life at Avalon in the past, but that advice has proven false. I return to you now for true guidance because I know you understand my heart."

Lile raised her hand to interrupt. "Wait, messenger. Is this meant only for my ears?"

"I was given no specific instructions about that, Reverend Lady." He waited briefly and then asked, "May I continue?"

She hesitated, glanced quickly at Nimue, and almost, it seemed, forbade him; but then she must have decided that Morgan would have instructed such an audience if it were necessary and again she nodded.

"No doubt you've heard the news about Merlin's cousin, Arthur, my brother, and the plans that are being made for him."

At this an odd grimace flickered across Lile's face.

"I fear the antagonism that will surely arise and the position it will leave me in - having to choose between a husband and a brother. I am no friend of Merlin's, yet Arthur is my blood. My lady, I am at a loss. Uryen is determined that we will attend the ceremony sanctioning Arthur as High Chieftain, so we will be well on the road to Caer Leon by the time you receive my messenger. Merlin called for the sanctioning to be on the Feast of Beltaine, little more than a fortnight after his announcement. No one is being given any time to think, much less act. I know I cannot expect an answer from you until I return home. We will spend the summer as usual in Caer Ysgrifennu and I will await your messenger there.

"One last request, My Lady, if you will allow it. I wish for your permission to practice my Art here in Rheged. It is the only way I will regain the centre in my life. I should never have left it. And no matter what occurs, I shall never abandon it again.

"I hope the goddesses are with you and that this finds you well. Sent this last night of Alder in the seventh year of Uryen's rule in Rheged."

Lile crossed her arms and walked a little away from the others. The sweet trill of a warbler danced through the sun-filled air. Nimue and the other woman studied Lile for an indication of how to react. Morgan's possible involvement in Merlin's scheme had been discussed at length away from Lile's ear by almost all the bandrui as soon as the announcement about Arthur reached the shores of Avalon. Nimue had argued strongly for Morgan's conspiracy even though everyone else believed that Morgan would never have traded Avalon for personal gain. The existence of a brother, however, did finally make some sense out of Morgan's leaving, something her friends at Avalon had never been able to reconcile. And Nimue had been quick to agree with them on that point. Of course, she explained, the discovery of a brother would have persuaded Morgan to leave, but they must also ask themselves why else would Morgan keep such wonderful news a secret unless she knew about Merlin's plans to put that brother in power. Morgan, Nimue insisted, was not faultless.

Now it seemed that Nimue had been proven wrong. However, Nimue showed no sign of chagrin. Instead she looked quite pleased.

After a few moments Lile turned back to the man. "Thank you. We will see that food and accomodations are provided for you on the mainland."

"Will there be a return?"

"I...no. I will make other arrangements. But you may carry a message to the village for me. Seek out an armourer called Corb. He is well known..."

The messenger nodded enthusiastically. "Even in Rheged we know his name."

"Yes," a hard glint entered her voice, "I am certain you have. When you find him tell him this: that Lady Lile is in need of his services immediately and he should come to Avalon at once. Sent this fourth night of Willow in my twentieth year as Lady of the Lake. It is the fourth night tonight, is it not? Yes, well...that is all."

She looked at the man expectantly.

With a short bow after he repeated her message, he turned and the three women silently watched him disappear into the grove of trees.

"Now we must return to the fortress," Lile ordered and started off, leaving the other two to follow.

They hung back a bit and the other women elbowed Nimue. "What are you looking so pleased with yourself for? You were wrong."

"Ummm. I should learn some things never change. Just when I think that Morgan might be a challenge, she turns out to be an idiot."

"It doesn't sound as though she is to me."

Nimue shook her head. "Morgan wouldn't know a real chance at power if she fell over it. Imagine, sister to a High Chieftain and *cousin* to Merlin. And she dismisses the opportunity for influence," Nimue bent to pluck the single leaf clinging to a short stem, "to commit herself to picking weeds." With a flick of her fingers, she tossed the slip of Adder's Tongue over her shoulder.

The evening fires were stars flickering in the vast, dark expanse of grassland, each an eye of light giving focus to the shadowed sounds around them. As many as the children of the goddess Dana, Morgan thought. All the tribes of Dana have come to light their fires outside the walls of Caer Leon and kindle cold suspicion.

"Every chieftain will attend." Uryen's words.

And all day they came, their mounds of possessions and make-shift shelters sprouting up like clumps of mushrooms in the shadow of the decaying amphitheatre near the moist banks of the river Usk. Then, while the sun still illuminated the darkness in their eyes, they roamed, constantly roamed from one camp to the next making proper greetings, silently appraising. With the coming of night they took to their own and now only the vague resonance of their conclusions drifted on the wind.

Alone, Morgan sat on the ground next to her fire and watched the flickering figures imprisoned in the flames. As a child she thought those black shapes were souls in the sea of Annwn waiting impatiently to be reborn into the bodies that would serve them for all eternity. Now she saw only this life, the ominous, unpredictable movements of those entrapped by the present.

On the road three nights before, when Caer Leon was still a place half-forgotten and buried in pain, Morgan walked under the moon asking for that light's salve to saturate her fear. So much waited for her inside the walls of Caer Leon and it rose up in her mind with rasping talons and searing cries: the lies of Merlin, the loneliness of Arthur, the lost places where she had lived and played, the last place she had seen her mother.

Today a young man came by, still dressed in the dust of the road, and reminded her of another ghost. Margawse. In the face of everything else, Morgan had not considered that her sister might also attend Arthur's sanctioning. The warrior was representing Lot, Chieftain of Gododdin, who had stayed behind to wear the blood of the Saxons pressing at his borders. Morgan's sister was Lot's wife, held in Gododdin too by childbed. Margawse - one of the big girls who used to dress her up in their mother's gowns and be her horse, pawing and prancing across the floor of the main hall. The other big girl, her sister Ilaine, she knew had died in childbirth not long ago. Morgan could not recall the face of either one.

There was no moon tonight. Tomorrow they would all be invited into Caer Leon. She would meet Arthur. She would look into Merlin's eyes. Cold fingers crept along her spine and she rose suddenly, desperate to find the moon.

In front of her was the amphitheatre, a wan crescent hanging on the edge of the darkness that led away from the fires. Morgan felt drawn to it and walked slowly through the damp stalks of broom and plantain grass until she stood at the entrance. Inside the night was thick and she could see only dimly the frail tiers that circled her. Oddly, though she stood embraced by Roman arms, she felt a familiar comfort surround her. It was the circle, the shape of continuance and the Eternal that centred her thoughts and feelings. Morgan wrapped her arms around herself and listened. And from deep inside she heard,

> Even mighty Rome   bent to the Eternal Circle
> waned   as it had waxed

Modron. Modron was still with her.

Morgan first felt the goddess's touch again in the moonlight that had poured over her the last night in Carlisle. Abandoned by Taliesin, who had eagerly answered Merlin's invitation to perform at Arthur's sanctioning, and Uryen, who had gone to sleep somewhere else but left his anger and suspicion to prowl fiercely around her, Morgan lay on her bed letting the light fill every opening in her body. As its strength filled her limbs, heated the cold fear that weakened her, she understood in her blood and her tears what she must do. She had to reconnect herself to what she knew was true. Then she would have the strength to protect the one who really needed her: her son.

Standing now amidst the murky rubble of what had long passed away, Morgan concentrated on Modron and the moon, that which had always been and would always be, even when mortal eyes were blind to it. Her decision to contact Lile had been the right one and her reasons seemed clearer to her than ever.

Morgan had realized immediately that Uryen, irrespective of other chieftains' alliances or his wife's, would very likely oppose Arthur's claim. Submission was not a word Uryen knew. And knowing that conflict was imminent, Morgan's first inclination had been to abstain. It seemed unreasonable to choose between a brother who was being manipulated by the lies of Merlin and a husband who believed she was part of them. But just as quickly she understood that she *had* to take a stand for Owein's sake. Her son was inexorably tied to both men.

As the son of Arthur's sister, Owein was Arthur's *irrefutable* blood kin. A man could never be absolutely sure that the child of any woman other than his sister was truly related to him, so a sister's son was the preferred heir. Then again, the son of a man with no sisters, like Uryen *and* like Uther, claimed all with his father's blessing. Ironically her son faced an equal if not worse threat than Arthur had by being born. Unaided, Owein would be torn apart by a civil war between his father and his uncle.

It was left to her to form the strongest protection she could around her son because if conflict arose, regardless of the outcome, Owein would have enemies. First, Morgan reasoned, she must be strongly anchored herself and that she would only find with Lile.

Because of Lile's religious stature and friendship with more than a few powerful families throughout Britain, Lile held considerable political influence of her own. Lile would make a powerful ally, one who, Morgan felt sure, remained uninfluenced by Merlin. Soon, Lile would announce her position regarding Arthur's claim. By aligning herself to Lile now Morgan had taken that stand too before even knowing what it would be. It didn't matter. Morgan knew that Lile would side with truth, regardless of plots or misused prophecy. And by standing with Lile, Morgan and her son would be secured to that truth, strengthened politically and spiritually and protected from being used further.

Besides, Morgan felt confident that she knew what Lile's position would be. Merlin's manipulations made it obvious to Morgan that Arthur was not the fulfilment of the prophecy. Arthur was Merlin's way of regaining the power he once had as Advisor and blood kin to the supreme power in Britain. If Morgan could see it, certainly Lile would know that Merlin was using the prophecy just as he had used everything and everyone else, and she would not endorse Arthur.

Even so, Morgan's decision left her with a dark companion of guilt. Uryen, she kept telling herself, could protect himself but Arthur was still only a boy who had no one to guard him against deceit and misuse. In Morgan's heart she wished that she would also find a way to reach her brother and offer him something he could trust. With Lile and the strength of Modron behind her, she might one day be able to do that. Returning to the Art was ultimately the best she could offer

Arthur too.

Morgan pulled her cloak more tightly around her shoulders and gazed up at the stars. On a moonless night they riotously claimed the sky, so many you would think there would never again be room for the moon. Let them play at claiming the night, she thought. As she began to turn away, eager to wrap her sleeping son in the crescent of her body, she noticed a black cloud suddenly sweep across part of the sky. For a moment, the darkness offered no shape; but then it swirled into the shadow of a raven, an enormous devourer of stars. And silently Morgan welcomed Modron back to Her realm.

The afternoon sun threw a thin curtain of light across the centre of Caer Leon's main hall. Straw-coloured dust, caught in the creamy glow, fluttered between the chimney and the cold cauldron beneath. The hall was astonishingly empty, almost without sign of habitation. No banners hung over the chieftain's seat, no battle trophies decorated the walls, no images of patron gods guarded the hearth. It was as if someone had swept away all the pieces of Gwent's history. In one corner a shadow solidified, and then part of it broke away to come towards Morgan.

"Morgan. How well you look." Merlin glided across the floor to stand next to her, smiling. He was dressed simply, no torc, no staff, in the long, black wool robe that was everyday druidic dress.

"And this is your son," he said, studying the squirming boy in Morgan's arms. "A tribute to you." He turned and walked back towards the firepit, indicating where they should sit.

Morgan remained where she was, her stance wide, her eyes narrow. "I'm surprised you actually granted me this audience...although I consider it my right to meet my brother before everyone else does." Releasing Owein, Morgan squinted at the dim outline of the doorway which led to the hall's private quarters. The room beyond, visible underneath the hide covering, was dark and obviously unoccupied. "Where is he?" Morgan demanded. "I expected him to be here."

Merlin was at his most inscrutable. "Arthur will be along shortly," he said mildly. "He's rather excited about meeting you too, Morgan." The druid made himself comfortable on the floor and called to Owein. "Come here, boy. Let your cousin Merlin see you."

Like any child, Owein did exactly what his mother didn't want him to and pulled away from Morgan to toddle tentatively towards the druid.

"Leave him alone. Owein, come here."

Merlin folded his hands calmly in his lap. "He looks like his father. Very like him."

Morgan had moved forward to retrieve her son and now stood quite near, almost over Merlin. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Outside the growl of passing carts, the barked orders of drivers, the grunts and yelps of those scurrying to make everything ready for the celebration circled unceasingly. Merlin rose slowly, his robe unfolding and then settling back around him like hawk's wings.

"I'm not speaking a foreign language, Morgan. It means he's a good looking boy." He shrugged slightly, eyes glittering, and then turned from her to walk casually around the firepit. Stopping after only a few steps he added, almost lightly, "Such anger waiting there inside of you..." Facing her again he opened his hands in a gesture of magnanimity. "It appears you have more that you want to say to me than to your brother."

He waited on her outburst like an indulgent parent. Perhaps Merlin was unaware that, though Morgan had still only seen eighteen harvests, he was no longer dealing with a child. Morgan did not allow his attitude to demoralize her, but stood squarely facing him and showed no urgency to speak. Even Owein was quiet, one small hand draped around his mother's neck and the other absently rubbing the soft wool hem of her sleeve.

"I came here to talk with my brother," Morgan began honestly, "but I think you're right. There is something I need to say to you."

Just then a smallish form eclipsed the light from the main entry way. "Merlin! It's even better than you said! The chain mail they're making for me - Oh!" The young man stopped in his head-long bolt through the door and stared gracelessly at Morgan.

"Arthur," Merlin turned just as patronizingly towards the newcomer, "this is your sister. Morgan of Rheged. And her son Owein."

"Oh."

Certainly the manner, the appearance of distinction was there in Arthur. Even though he had seen merely fourteen harvests, he looked, in all ways, the budding warrior chief: straight shoulders, proud carriage, a slight swagger to the walk, powerful muscles promised just below the surface, the expectation of recognition and praise from others in his eyes. His confident manner decorated with bronze-haired, hazel-eyed good looks easily won the appreciation and hearts of others. The only thing missing was the spark of keen perception. Arthur was an image of promise and ability that cast no shadow.

Morgan, however, for the moment was entranced by his physical reality. She ran to Arthur and, releasing her child almost as an afterthought, wrapped her arms around her brother. "Oh Arthur...since I first found out about you, I've wanted to be with you." She held him by the shoulders so that she could look into his face. "With each moon I prayed I would receive word that you were free from hiding. It's been such a long wait."

Though he did not return her embrace, a shy flush warmed his face and he dropped his gaze. "I wondered about you sometimes too," he admitted with a guilty glance at Merlin.

With that Morgan turned back to the druid. "I want to talk with my brother."

Calmly, maybe even little amused, Merlin answered, "Go ahead."

"Alone."

Now Merlin addressed Arthur. "You don't have the time for a long conversation. There are still many things which must be accomplished before tonight."

Nodding, Arthur grinned at Morgan. "We can talk later, maybe."

As though Arthur had not spoken, Morgan kept her eyes on the druid. "Now, Merlin."

Courageous as Morgan's adamant stance was, it was badly timed and it made her look arrogant and belligerent. Merlin had the advantage of close familiarity with Arthur, and the boy was not curious enough to puzzle over what their individual interest in him might be, nor the source of their antagonism.

Merlin moved to put an arm over Arthur's shoulders and glared at Morgan as if daring her to even think of issuing him another order.

"Wait...uh," Arthur frowned a little, "why do you want Merlin to leave?"

Morgan struggled to stay in control, oblivious to Owein's persistent tugging on her skirt. "Because what I have to say to you is just between family."

"Merlin is my family."

Slowly the druid withdrew his arm from the boy.

"Arthur," Morgan reached for her brother again, but he shifted ever so slightly out of her way. Beside him, Merlin was a stone.

Morgan caught Merlin's glance briefly and then took a deep breath. "I think you've been fooled about some things."

A smile might have flickered across the druid's face.

"Or at least misinformed. And I'd like a chance --"

"Just a moment here," Arthur folded his arms across his chest. "Are you calling me a *fool* ? What makes you think you can say that to me?"

Merlin stepped between them, taking Arthur's arm. "Arthur, other things deserve your attention." Without any physical protest from the boy, Merlin guided him towards the door.

The intervention was so abrupt that Morgan was left momentarily speechless. She bent finally to her son who, as though he understood the reasons for his mother's preoccupation, had been surprisingly patient.

At the entry way, softly so Morgan could not hear, Merlin answered Arthur's questioning look. "I'll explain later. Now go."

As Morgan secured Owein's hand in hers she called out, "Arthur!" but her brother was gone.

"You!" Morgan confronted Merlin. "You had no right to dismiss me like that. Telling him other things *deserved* his attention."

"I had every right. Arthur is preparing for the most important night of his life and I won't have him concerned with anything else. I don't know what you planned to say to him..."

"Yes you do. That's why you stopped me."

Merlin sighed heavily.

Raising her hand in exasperation, Morgan stopped him before he could say anything more. "Don't even try. You can't mollify or intimidate me. I won't allow it. And if you think you have control me, think again."

She hauled her son past him and stopped just before the door, the hem of her gown almost brushing his robe. "And I'll tell you something else. You will never use me again."

To her back, though certainly loud enough this time for her to hear, Merlin answered with a chilling calmness, "I have no more use for you, Lady Morgan."

By the time Morgan returned to her campsite, she had herself under control and wordlessly joined those seated around an early fire. Several women were busy organizing a meal for the members of Uryen's company, five of Uryen's *teulu* and their families who had joined the chieftain on this journey. Since the festivities surrounding Arthur's sanctioning were to begin tonight with the celebration of Beltaine, the meal, though early, had to be a substantial one. Beltaine called for a fast from dusk till dawn and because Arthur's ceremony was to coincide with the rising sun, no one expected to eat again until the sun was high overhead.

Rushing over from the pot of mutton she had been supervising, Enhinti looked keenly interested in Morgan's return, though she tried to seem more concerned with Owein's state than her mistress's.

"Do you want me to see if I can get him to sleep a while? He won't be awake for much of tonight otherwise. Actually, you look a little pale yourself."

Morgan handed the sullen child over without a word, too distracted to notice Enhinti's scrutiny, and picked irritatedly at the food that was still cooking over the fire. Blowing at the fingers she'd burned by grabbing at the edge of the bread on the griddle, she asked sharply, "Where's his father?"

"Do you want me to go get him?"

Morgan started towards her tent. "What about Taliesin?"

"With the other bards who've been invited, I expect. Why?" she asked, her curiosity now unrestained as she hurried to follow Morgan. "If you need someone to talk to..."

But her mistress had stopped to gaze at the sleek, green coastal plain and beyond, delphinium blue, the estuary of the river Usk, freckled white by the afternoon sun.

"I was just wondering where everyone had gone," she answered softly," and why I'm here...alone."

Enhinti put an arm around Morgan's waist and gave her a quick hug. "Don't be silly. I'm here. I'll look after you."

With a tight smile Morgan nodded, but pulled slowly away.

"You there. Is one of you Morgan of Rheged?"

From behind the two women the stunted shape of a man, curled and gnarled like an ancient oak, hobbled forth and leaned on his staff. He might have dropped from the clouds or formed whole out of the billowing trails of smoke, so sudden was his appearance. But his voice was solid and strong.

"Red hair, she said. It must be you." Rudely, he pointed his staff at Morgan and then with his odd, three- legged rhythm stepped forward until he was close enough for his breath to touch her cheek. Because of a cruel twist to his neck, he had to peer up at her from under his brow.

Looking both dismayed and irritated, Morgan started to back away, but he jabbed her arm with one long finger to punctuate his words.

"Corb. Name's Corb. I've a message for you. You are Morgan?"

The name obviously had not yet recalled anything to Morgan because she simply nodded while continuing to watch him as though he might be dangerous.

"Well," he turned one eye at Enhinti, " I don't know who you are and this message is for Morgan."

Enhinti bristled but kept her ground.

"Can we talk alone?"

Now Morgan did recoil. "Certainly not."

Corb shuffled up even closer to her and whispered, "Lile."

Understanding, excitement, puzzlement, apprehension all took their moment in Morgan's eyes. With a shaking hand, she indicated the tent beside them. "We can talk in there. Enhinti, will you go and make sure some food is kept aside for this man?"

Though no acknowledgment came from Enhinti, Morgan did not glance over at her and so missed the intensity on her face. As Morgan led Corb inside the tent, Enhinti made no move towards the others.

Owein lay sleeping on his side, cheeks rosy with dreams, forehead damp from the closeness of the air inside the tent.

"I remember who you are now, Corb." Morgan indicated a soft sheepskin on which he could sit and took her own on the edge of the blankets wrapped around her son. The tent was a small shelter of hides erected only for sleeping and so Morgan and Corb were knee to knee in the orange dusk that swelled warm around them.

Awkwardly, Morgan began, "I apologise for being abrupt, but I expected a real messenger to arrive from Lady Lile...that is, someone who formally carried word...well, you know what I mean. And I thought I would receive him in Rheged, not here."

The old man squinted at her and rubbed his nose. "I'm here to take a tribute to Arthur," he shrugged, "and bring you word from Lile at the same time."

Morgan suddenly clutched at Corb's robe, which was pulled tightly over his crossed legs. "A tribute for Arthur?"

"Yes. She commissioned me to make -"

"*For* Arthur?"

"Yes, yes." He stared meaningfully down at Morgan's hand.

"I can't believe Lady Lile is supporting Arthur's claim. Are you sure she sent you?"

Corb tugged his garment away from her with a grunt.

"What did she say?"

After a long look that took in Morgan's strained features, her balled fists and shallow breath, he replied somewhat less gruffly, "That you are welcome to return to the Art at any time, but right now it would mean you would have to leave your husband and your son for a time. So perhaps you had better wait."

Morgan pulled away as if she had been slapped and reached over to place a hand protectively on her son's back. "What does she mean, leave?"

Corb shrugged. He was not withholding anything from her.

There was nothing more he could tell Morgan other than Lile's words, words deliberately couched in simplicity so that only Morgan would look for hidden intent.

Instead of searching Morgan reacted: maybe to the strength of her anger against Merlin, to her fear, or to her sense of isolation. With a cry she grasped her sleeping son, gathered him up tightly against her chest and breathed her suspicions into his silken hair. "How can Arthur be the fulfilment of the prophecy? Oh Lile, why are you with Merlin? And why have you shut me out?"

Outside in the gathering dusk, Enhinti pulled her cloak up over her head and moved silently away from the tent. Unhurriedly but with determination she walked through the gathering crowd to the gates of Caer Leon. The password she was given long ago would get her past the guards at the gates and those around Arthur, and straight to Merlin's ear.

divine youth   Belenos   whose dual fires burn at Beltaine
was witness   to our festivity   that night in Willow
when   Merlin ignited the wicker wheels   and rolled them
to the centre of that revived arena   from wicker cages

three times three creatures   were emptied into the
dark carrying lighted splinters   of willow   wide and
high they scattered   taking new fire to the night
between the blazes we drove cattle cleansing them
and their season   and after the worthy winner gave his
prize to the gods   hurling the horse's head into the
roaring heart   rendered ash and ember   the fires
enticed a few requesting luck   as barefoot they ran
three times through Belenos' sigh   surrounded by
plenty surpassed   only by Annwn's pleasures   others
attended dawn when new light would illume   the promise of
Arthur

The night of Beltaine was spectacular, its sparkling presence excising any lurking shadows. Even Merlin's decision to hold the festivities in the Roman amphitheatre was forgiven. The celebration was so enormous and overwhelming that most forgot they were nowhere near a sacred *nemeton* or holy Oak. And after their night of revelry, the dawn brought an eager procession from the amphitheatre to the foot of Gwent's tribal tree, which was situated in a glade not far from the hills beyond the fortress.

As the sun cast its first pale strands of light through the leaves, Merlin, wearing the druidic white robe of ceremony, addressed the tree, festooned with clusters of small white flowers itself. In the centre of its gnarled trunk, thrust clear through, was a sword.

"Spirit of Elder, hear us."

The group who had gathered around fell silent, awed by mystical presence. Only the morning trill of a meadow pipit and the rustle of a young breeze breeched the silence. Then Merlin spoke again.

"Elder, tree of Gwent, Sacred Witness, confirm now the one of our choosing." He signalled for Arthur to come and stand beside him.

Arthur came proudly to centre view, wearing a long sleeved shirt of crimson, trimmed with gold thread embroidery; and over it a magnificent tunic of gold brocade, knee length and sewn with scarlet thread. From his shoulders fell a mantle of scarlet brocade, which was pinned with a gold pennanular brooch enamelled with spirals of red glass. At his throat he wore a gold torque, around his forehead rested an unadorned circlet of gold. and at his thigh was an empty scabbard of finely tooled leather fastened with a gold buckle. He stood poised and confident, the signs of a sleepless night nowhere evident on his smooth face.

"Spirit of Elder", Merlin continued, raising his arms high, "grant this petitioner your strength. Allow him to take the sword of leadership from you, to wield it in your name to protect your domain."

Everyone knew that removing the sword required no strength. Its placement in the middle of the tree was stictly ceremonial and after many cycles of such use, the groove it rested in worn smooth as glass.

But the power of the ceremony still held its bite. The crowd collectively held their breath as Arthur stepped forward to the task.

He gripped the hilt with both hands and cried, "Elder, I take command!" Swiftly he drew out the sword and turned to face his audience, brandishing it high. Its golden hilt was engraved with elder flowers and berries, the entwining fruit of that tree lending its strength to the blade.

The tribes of Gwent let loose a cheer, "Hail Arthur! May you die in battle!" while the rest of those present, with their bond to other *cantrefs* , remained hushed, watchful. But no one protested. Not yet.

meadow sweet dew dressed a spider white   waiting in his web between   Lile and the flower she desired   and the Lady paused to respect the silken strings   knowing the

hunter could endlessly reweave to secure his prey   nodding
at his efforts while noticing   the path beyond his bite
moving slowly past his black shadow   to the essence
she sought

With the last copper streams of sun, activity inside the walls of Caer Leon renewed. A day of sleep had refreshed and made everyone eager for the feast in Arthur's honour, and the aromas drifting on the silken evening breeze promised that the celebration would be a grand one.

A long line of guests waited agitatedly outside the main hall for the slow moving crowd ahead of them to enter, find seats, greet friends, and clear the way. Swords and shields clattered as each man entered and propped his own against the walls, ringing the room with weaponry. And as the guests took their places on the floor at row after row of tightly placed tables, their raucousness only slightly transcending the almost audible odour of smoke and sweat and beer, they viewed a room transformed.

Contrary to the way Morgan had seen it the day before, now the hall resounded with presence. As if Arthur's lost lineage breathed once more, Uther's dragons roared from red-gold banners draped across the ceiling; and on the wall above the main table, Ambrosius's battered sword and shield presided over all. Elsewhere the walls were dominated by their war trophies: Irish shield-bosses and horse-bits, Saxon lances and knives, Pictish silver chains of rank, and the jewellery plunder from a score of raids.

Wealth, too, spoke loudly in the room. Guests were given the luxury of red brocade cushions to sit upon, and silver drinking horns and bowls and spoons for their use. Arthur himself, flanked by two hunting dogs wearing gold collars, raised a golden drinking horn to his lips and gazed past the steaming bronze cauldron hanging over the firepit at his celebrants. His face was flushed and damp.

Morgan made her way between the tables to one of the empty places beside Taliesin. Having found some vestige of composure, she settled down on the cushion, arranging her linen gown carefully beneath her, without comment to the bard. They were close to the head table, just to the right of it, and Morgan could look into the face of her brother quite easily. She could also look into Merlin's.

Taliesin placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered, "I've been worried about you."

"When?" She met his eyes unflinchingly.

Nonplussed, he ran his hand through his hair. "I heard you saw Merlin."

"And you hurried straight away to see how I fared." She pick up a shaft of straw from the floor and slit her thumbnail through it. "Where have you been? I didn't even see you at last night's festivities."

"Morgan..." the bard was desperately uncomfortable with her coldness and struggled with something he needed to say. "I *have* been concerned. But something extraordinary has been happening to me the last few days. I've been talking to someone."

"Merlin."

Taliesin gave her a puzzled, hurt look.

"How else did you hear about me? Haven't you been in constant consultation with him about your performance tonight?"

The suggestion disgusted him. "Arthur. Arthur told me."

Morgan glanced over at the smiling boy, so busy with the fawning men who surrounded him. One in particular dominated the new High Chieftain's attention, the first to be accepted to Arthur's *teulu* ; a man named Kei.

Arthur had yet to look Morgan's way.

"So Arthur's the one who has fascinated you?"

"No. Well, yes...in a way. But that's not who I was trying to tell you about."

"And what did he say about me? No," she held up a hand, "don't. I can imagine."

Taliesin looked over at Arthur and a sadness settled on him. "He's not so bad, you know. Just young and in need of guidance...from true friends."

"And you're his closest friend now I suppose."

Gently, Taliesin rubbed her back. "Morgan, give me a chance. Maybe I am his closest...his only friend right now. But I am *definitely* yours.

Tears dampened her lashes and she wiped a trembling hand across her eyes to dry them. Just in time.

Uryen sat down heavily beside her. "I thought you two had given up such cosiness. Or," he challenged Taliesin, "is it now that you've designs on being Arthur's bard, you've refound something in common." Uryen's glare passed to Morgan.

Before either could refute, a dozen or so servants stilled all conversation by entering and positioning themselves around the room. As soon as they reached their designated points, a parade of silver trays was passed in from the main door, one servant to another, until every table was laden with delicacies: roast stag, poached salmon, tiny roasted song birds served on a skewer, a variety of shellfish steamed and offered whole; and platters of fresh breads, cheeses and butter, vegetable dishes and condiments. Then two servants moved to ladle out chunks of boiled beef from the cauldron.

Morgan barely touched her food. Instead, through the orange-lit haze, she watched her brother; the acquiescent tilt to his head whenever Merlin spoke to him, the flush of pride on his cheeks, his quick and open appraisal of any woman who moved through the room.

And Merlin, robed in shadow beside him, fondling command.

Morgan pushed her plate away. If Uryen noticed her lack of appetite, he didn't comment. Neither did Taliesin who had far less to eat than usual himself.

The servants began to clear away. Taliesin and the other bards present straightened their clothes, wiped their beards clean, smoothed their hair; it was time for the entertainment.

But before any bard rose, Merlin stood, his silver brocade mantle settling on his shoulders like frost. Wordlessly, grey eyes glittering without mirth, he waited for the crowd to fall silent. When only the murmurs of curiosity rose above the crackle of the hearth, Merlin said slowly, "Two late-comers wish to make tribute to Arthur. Raise your drinking horns, countrymen, and make them welcome."

At that a cheer rose up from those all too eager to comply. When a man came to replenish Uryen's wine, he declined.

As the tables were moved aside to make a narrow aisle leading up to the hearth and Arthur, suddenly, out of the chill black air of the main doorway Corb appeared.

Arthur looked to Merlin.

"Tell him to come in," Merlin urged.

"Advance, sir," Arthur commanded too loudly, "and tell us from where you come."

With surprising steadiness, Corb hobbled to the fire's edge. And with the same clear voice he began, "My Lord, I come to represent Avalon."

Taliesin gasped and took Morgan's hand, but her stoic response to the announcement made him search her face intently. She did not meet his eyes and slowly he let his fingers slip away from hers.

"I am called Corb. The armourer. No doubt you've heard of my work."

In answer, Arthur again could only look to Merlin.

Some strange, private thoughts played across Merlin's sharp features and he glanced over at Morgan. He seemed momentarily unaware of his charge's silent question, preoccupied instead with the hurt in her eyes. Morgan shivered and hugged herself, but she did not look away.

Slowly, more to Morgan than Arthur, Merlin answered with careful words. "Corb has brought much renown to Avalon. He is among the most gifted makers of weaponry," Merlin finished, smiling at Arthur.

"Among!" Corb shook his staff, "In Andraste's sight, there's none better."

"Ah-hem. Yes. Well," Arthur fumbled. "On with it, then. Your purpose, I mean."

"I come to bring you a tribute from Lady Lile wrought by my own hand. Lady Lile thought that I, as its creator, should be given the privilege of presenting it to you."

With that Corb abruptly turned and walked back to the doorway and leaned out while balancing unsteadily on his staff to retrieve a long, cloth-wrapped object. Once in his hands, he carried it reverentially back to the fire and offered it with outstretched arms to Arthur.

"Hail Arthur. High Chieftain of Britain. May you die in battle. And may this be the sword you take to Annwn."

Corb pulled away the cloth to reveal a magnificent sword, its blade as bright as sun on sea, as keen as shards of ice, its hilt encrusted with blue and green swirls of enamel like ripples on the cold water of a mountain lake. The beauty of it shattered the silence and everyone started commenting at once.

Arthur started to rise, so eager was he to hold it, but Merlin placed a firm hand on his shoulder to force him back down. Then Merlin whispered to Arthur again and the boy nodded.

"Uhhh...would someone pass it over? Yes, thanks. Yes, just here, I guess." Hand over hand the sword reached Arthur's feet. "Ohh," he exclaimed, not touching it, "it's quite wonderful, isn't it?" Merlin smiled in response.

"You are to be commended, Corb. It is an admirable trophy," Merlin replied.

"No. Not a trophy, Sage. It is Our Lady's hope that the High Chieftain will *use* it to guard and protect

Britain."

"I'm sure that is her hope, Corb." Merlin's tone was even and tight.

Still untouched, the sword glittered with life at Arthur's feet and the boy could not take his eyes off of it.

Merlin nudged him, "Give him your thanks, My Lord. We have yet another presentation before the entertainment may begin."

Roused, Arthur thanked Corb heartily and begged him to stay and feast.

Again his surly self, Corb replied, "A night of feasting does not sit well with an old man. I would rather go and rest." With a very short bow, he shuffled back into the cold breath of night.

The room ignited with boistrous speculation. Lile's endorsement of Arthur, judging from the low swell of growls beneath the chatter, had surprised more than a few.

Uryen included. He grasped Morgan by the arm and jerked her towards him, bringing her ear up close to his mouth. "Deny it now...that you side with them. And always have!"

Morgan took a deep, slow breath and faced him. "Uryen, I swear to you -"

He released her with a shove. "Save your false oaths for a less intelligent ear." And, unseen by Morgan, he caught the attention of another chieftain across the room.

Rubbing her arm, Morgan closed her eyes tightly.

"Are you alright?" Taliesin whispered.

"It's the worst, Tay," she whispered back. He nodded slowly, keeping his eyes on her.

Once more the crowd grew suddenly still as two strangely dressed men stepped in from the darkness. They were wearing plain, undyed woolen robes, much like a druid's, and their hair was completely cut away except for a small circle left on the crowns of their heads.

"I don't believe it," Uryen hissed.

Morgan gave him a questioning look, but said nothing.

From Merlin's smile the room knew that he considered the presence of these men quite an accomplishment.

After yet another nudge from the druid, Arthur began to stumble out a speech of welcome. "Uh..Greetings, countrymen. Please, uh, accept our goodwill and come forward to, umm, to introduce yourselves to our company."

"Cadoc." Taliesin whispered, grabbing Morgan's knee excitedly.

At Arthur's bidding, the two men stepped forward, one slightly behind the other, to the place exactly where Corb had stood.

"You know them?" Though she kept her voice low, her shock was evident in her tone.

"Yes, Cadoc. The one closest to us. He's the one I was trying to tell you about." The bard pointed to the younger of the two men, a short, weak-chinned, roundish man who gave a first impression of being less than ordinary. Except when you met his eyes. Within their earth shade lay the confidence of a thousand commanders and the contentment of one who had forever vanquished a thousand evils.

Before Morgan could comment, the elder of the two men spoke. "Sir, I am Dyfrig, abbot of Llanilltud Fawr and my companion is Cadoc, abbot of Llancarfan."

Dyfrig and Cadoc. The two most powerful Christians in all Britain. The idea of associating power with Christians was a new one for almost everyone present. Christianity had been one of those dwindling left-over Roman cults that made no more difference in Britain any more than did who ruled in Rome. But these two men represented a new phenomenon, one few chieftains were ready to acknowledge as a threat. And that was the new and rapid growth of what most laughingly called the "Christian caers": tiny unarmed fortresses called monastries.

Dyfrig presided over the monastery whose school was gaining in popularity among wealthy land owners as a fosterage for their children. Over the past twenty years, Llanilltud Fawr had acquired an impressive amount of land in appreciation for that service. With land came people dependent on its rental for their livelihood and that, like the fertile fields around the caers of chieftains, bought loyalty.

Cadoc, on the other hand, inherited such loyalty and so offered even more serious consideration. Cadoc had used his family's wealth to build his monastery and was rumoured to be planning on governing his inherited territories from that Christian camp. If he managed this, Llancarfan would become the first armed Christian stronghold in Britain.

"We come," Dyfrig continued, "to bring the new High Chieftain a tribute." At that the abbot clapped his hands and behind him two more monks, similarly dressed, scurried in carrying a draped object that looked suspiciously similar to Corb's gift.

"And," Dyfrig took the gift from his charges, "with its *acceptance* ..." he drew the gift out of its covering and held aloft another startlingly well-crafted sword. Along its hilt swirls of gold inlayed with crimson glass lept fire, and it seemed to breathe with the red and yellow flame of a dragon's tongue. "...we come to annoint you, Arthur, *King* of the newest nation in God's sight."

A low rumble took shape in the corners of the hall. Cadoc stepped quickly forward and said above the gathering noise, "Accept our gift, and admit Britain to its rightful place as one of the great nations allied under Christ!"

At Merlin's prompting, Arthur stood, stepping over Corb's sword, and moved around to stand in front of the two abbots. Nervously, he looked past them at the angry faces, gulped and said anyway, "I-I- ac-c-cept your tribute -"

A large portion of the crowd stood with a roar.

Arthur glanced back over his shoulder at Merlin for reassurance. The druid clenched his fist.

Grasping the proffered sword, Arthur shakily continued. "And take my p-place as K-King and ally to the Pope and Rome." He held the sword high, its hilt casting a black cross over his eyes.

Shouting in outrage above the clamour, Uryen rushed forward and shoved Cadoc aside. "We'll not bow to Rome again!" He addressed the crowd, his fist raised in oath. "Never by all our British blood!"

There was a tangled, furious charge to the weapons against the walls, fights broke out before some were even retrieved, and Merlin's men, who had remained secretly armed, had the advantage.

Taliesin took an ashen Morgan by the arm and hauled her to her feet. "This way. Quickly." He pulled her towards a fleeting gap in the press of bodies.

"No!" Morgan jerked herself away from his grasp.

A metallic scent - steel and blood - filled the air.

She would have been safe from any harm with Taliesin. Bards were sacrosanct. But she was gone, pushing or being pushed through the fray towards the centre of the room, and Arthur.

The boy stood paralysed, frightened, surrounded by Merlin's men. The druid himself had disappeared. Suddenly, Arthur's guard fell out, one of the men taking a brutal blow to the side of his head and two others turning on the attacker.

Morgan rushed through the space left open and reached for her brother only to be choked back by an assailant, his thick arm bruising her neck. She bit down quick and hard and he let go of her with a yowl.

"Arthur," she gasped, plunging forward.

Arthur gave her a stunned look and in that instant, Merlin reappeared at his side. Where he'd been, what he'd been doing was impossible to guess because he looked as sleek and calm as when the night began. He positioned himself between Morgan and the boy, and stared down at her. It was as though the three stood in a dead quiet while chaos raged about them.

Without a word to her, without looking at the boy, Merlin ordered, "Grab the sword and MOVE, Arthur."

"Which sword?" Arthur looked from one to the other frantically.

Swiftly, Merlin reached across Arthur to grab the Christian one and thrust it into his hands. From behind two of Caer Leon's bards came up and took either side of Arthur. Several warriors completed the circle around the druid and the boy, shoving Morgan roughly aside. Then the group began to move as a unit towards the door. The bards were untouchable, the warriors unstoppable, and with surprising haste they were through the door.

Uryen yelled out, "Stop them!" and pushed his way past the fallen and the fighting, only to make it outside in time to see Arthur, Merlin and the monks gallop out of Caer Leon's gates: on fully packed and readied horses.

One by one, in the wake of the madness, amid the haze of dust and ash that was settling over the remains of the celebration, Morgan stepped over the fallen tables, their legs thrust wrongly into the air. Reaching the centre, where sunken flames sputtered under a grey pall, she stared at Lile's blue-green sword. With pale hands she raised it up from the dirt, wiped the grit away from its white blade and wrapped it gently in her cloak.

Hawthorn

Tree of Abstinence

Stark furrows of white sand stretched endlessly on either side of Morgan, burning her feet through the soles of her sandals, edging her toes in bright dust. She could smell the gull's cries - acrid, damp, teeming - but the open water was crusted with white and even the sky was arid blue, bleached by summer's heat and a pale, hot wind. She had never known the sea like this, so restrained, so full of waiting. In the past it had always been behind her, lashing at the dark span of cliffs beneath Caer Ysgrifennu. Now, as she stood on the shores of Gwynedd, she faced its other side, one that calmly surrendered itself to a vast emptiness.

At her feet, Owein pulled treasures out of the sand. Such strange beauty in so spare a landscape, Morgan thought, and silently watched the convoluted shadows of his play dance across the sand.

It had taken them a seven-night of hungry shadows, a treacherous journey through dank forest and chill mountain trail where every sound seemed the dark haunt of Merlin's men, to reach this shore. The threat of ambush, Uryen had promised, would be over once his men delivered Morgan, Owein and Enhinti safely to the placid Dee estuary on the Irish Sea.

This morning the men had discharged their duty by negotiating passage for her aboard a tradeship, which could complete the distance to the protective walls of Caer Ysgrifennu far more quickly and safely than any route over land. Now, with the exception of Enhinti who had walked a short way down the beach to watch with shaded eyes for the boat, Morgan and her son stood alone.

A puff of wind lifted a hot tongue of sand and uncurled it before them, obscuring shoreline and sky. As it retracted, it revealed two old men sewing their nets in the cool hollow of a boat pulled over to lie on its side. They are the ones who will take us to the ship, Morgan thought calmly, and waited for them to beckon her.

The nets lifted and pulled like waves under their hands.

Morgan looked back at the village, at the conical roofs engulfed in a current of gulls, for another sign of a guide. The other men had all risen before dawn to fish the black waters, and the women and children were somewhere winding their way through the long grasses well beyond the dunes, following a blessed boy on a white steed.

It was Oak King Day, the mid-point of the year when fruit was poised to ripen and seed a promise fulfilled. And as much as it celebrated growth, it heralded the decline. Now the days would shorten and the world would slowly descend into darkness.

Morgan looked back at the white glare of sun and sand, and felt poised herself, waiting in the starkness of the moment on a barren strip between meadow and sea.

Warily, after waiting out two full moons sequestered in Caer Leon, Uryen had listened to Morgan's plea. Despite the seductive whispers of others who promised that Arthur was hiding in Dumnonia, prisoner of the Saxons, sheltered by the Christians, gone from the shores of Britain altogether, Morgan spoke of Merlin. She knew he was watching, hiding in the overconfidence of Uryen's allies. The druid's parasitic words were capable of taking root in even the thinnest soil and he *would* return with Arthur to reclaim Caer Leon. Owein, Morgan had insisted, must be taken out of immediate danger. For his son's sake, Uryen had listened and allowed Morgan to withdraw from his scrutiny.

From around a silver finger of shoreline that extended west into the white water, a dark crescent appeared. The two old men stood, solemnly blinking at the water's glare, and turned their boat upright.

The one who came towards her had sun-blackened skin behind the stark white bristle of a beard and lines etched like the ripple of water across his cheeks. Wordlessly he motioned her to follow, to wade into the lapping warm surf and climb aboard the small craft. Ghostlike, Enhinti followed with their belongings and sat motionless beside Morgan and her son on the narrow seat. The smell of the men, all brine and sweat, as though they were made from the salt of the sea itself, stung her nostrils, and she wondered if they were water spirits come to drag their sacrifice down into the sunless depths.

Instead they brought her closer to the tradeship, its huge black body like a giant water beetle rocking slowly against the swell. Strong hands reached out to lift Enhinti and Owein up onto the massive, swaying deck. Then it was Morgan's turn. The old men below, bobbing, bobbing as the dark water between the boats spread, passed her up, her feet dangling over the depths for a moment, for eternity, and she looked down at the limitless black. A thousand leagues, a thousand thousand leagues were bridged by that chill gap of water, offering her a journey that, once made, was without return. She closed her eyes and completely gave herself over to trust. There was nothing else to claim her.

The ship, she found, was solid and swift, and though its crew were all opaque mutterings and veiled eyes, she felt curiously alone and safe among them. She left Owein and Enhinti to rest on the small space of deck provided for them at the back of the boat, and made her way past the oarsmen to a spot of open rail. The groans of effort behind her were like the sounds of surf against the shore.

By late day there was no longer any sight of land, or any variation between bleached sea and bleached sky.

Spellbound, Morgan steadily watched the emptiness, feeling her past and future fall away. She watched as she was completely separated from all expectation and influence, taken from any sphere, unable to seek support from anyone.

And something untangled inside her. It was good to be so freed.

The lapping of the water whispered that she must be alone; removed, for a time, from the scrutiny of anyone, even herself. And she felt the truth of it. She would choose this time to do without. Be without the hope of friendship, honesty or advice. Without, especially, her own disappointment and anger. Take this time to simply be - empty. A voyage of absense.

Looking up, she saw white gulls glide, soar and suddenly become silver strands of cloud, bits of the air itself, still visible but immersed in the vast embrace of colourless sky.

Morgan slept that night like those who are dead.

On the second day of her voyage, Morgan did not wake until the sun had travelled halfway across the sky. When she opened her eyes it was to the full touch of Suli, Wearer of the Sun, Eye of Knowledge, and she was washed clean as the white sky. Purged, she suddenly understood that she'd been wrong. That the loss she felt was not because of the acts of anyone. It was not a loss of trust in Lile or Arthur or Merlin or Taliesin or Uryen.

... whenever you think you've lost something...look in here. That's where you'll find it.

Suli warmed her with her mother's words again and she placed her hand over her heart. She knew now what she had really lost was her focus. Only by emptying herself had she found it again. Her Art. When she reached Caer Ysgrifennu, she would return to it, regardless of Lile or anyone. It was the essence of who she was, and she would never let it be neglected again.

And as she rose, though it seemed the dark shapes on board had increased from the day before and prowled more freely, she was greatly comforted.

That night Morgan slept the sleep of the innocent.

On the third day Morgan did not wake until sunset. Darkness crept into every corner, draped every shape and sound. Rising she went to gather her son in her arms and rock him gently with the rhythm of the ship.

As the blackness fell, across water and sky, she whispered her willingness. Her sacrifice was to go willingly into the void, because unshakably she trusted in return and renewal.

Oak

Tree of Continuance

Red streaks of sun sliced through the darkening woods at the edge of the clearing and the scent of metal, raw with blood, was louder than the cries and clang which still rang out. The battle had gone on much longer than any endurance, or any hope, but Uryen remained horsed and in the midst of it, his sword arm so tired he could no longer raise it above his head.

The enemy's spearmen charged again with lances raised, thrusting into man and horse flesh, the flanks of their own mounts steaming with the heat of the kill. Each assault was a slaughter; the enemy had four times the warband Uryen had, and their swordsmen still waited on the otherside of the clearing for their chance at battle. Uryen's spearmen were long slain.

Uryen and his allies fought close, hewing at the tightening circle of wood and iron, their shields spintering and shattering under the counter-blows. Over half of Uryen's warriors had already lost their shields, and were left with only their war-knives. The length of the lances meant they could rarely get close enough to their attacker to use their blades effectively. Yet Uryen's band fought on, their battle lust high even as the circle around them tightened.

Uryen roared out to his men, a valiant cry for the strength of the gods. You could see the tremor of exhaustion in his thighs and forearms, watch it ripple through him, threatening his control. Still, only the bards were watching and what they saw was not just Uryen's failing strength, but that of all his men as they were battered back to the edge of darkness. Arthur's allies were winning.

on the crest of a sun-spotted hill I sat   half-god   half
a man   a crimsoned rampage darkening the valley floor
wail and wreck wafting up to my ever attendant ear
brandished sword and buried marked by my unflinching gaze
untouchable was I   in my privileged place   protected
by their vanity   a necessary abstraction from the glory
they presumed   there to remember for the living and the
dead   and recount for their posterity   yet though I
witnessed truth   I was required to design from desire
shape with words what should have been   and place the
spark of brave life   in the expedient host but I tell you
now   the bravest names were left   to seep away in
epitaphs of blood   across the echoing plain

A flash to his left. Uryen raised his shield arm high to ward off the downward rushing blade. At the same time he yanked his horse to the right so the lance would also miss his steed's neck, and as he turned he saw a gap in the enemy's attack opening up behind them. Even before the swift return of his own strike, you could see in his eyes that he'd made a new decision. With a fierce yell he drove the edge of his sword into his attacker's neck, and as he was pulling it free, his white-eyed opponent desperately clutching at his arm, he bellowed out the order to turn north.

He had the command. The other chieftains and their warriors had given him that willingly while they were all still in Caer Leon. No one was a better strategist, even in the singular company of war-leaders, and no one else would have seen their only, fleeting chance to regroup.

As the band began to strategically lose ground, their opponents surprisingly did not try to contain them. Instead it seemed they loosened their hold, pressed less closely, ignored advantage. And too suddenly Uryen's band was free, racing across the clearing to the oak-shrouded hills.

A dark haired young man eased his battered body down to join the other men before the fire. His name was Accolon, not long admitted to Uryen's *teulu* and yet one of the few picked to accompany the chieftain to Arthur's sanctioning. The honour was in response to Accolon's unique character - uncompromisingly brave with an edge of rashness and unquestionably loyal while independently analytic. He was a man who didn't need to be given many orders.

"By Lleu's own sword," Accolon began, evoking the patron god of Rheged, "I swear I never even saw the miserable brat astride a horse. Where was the mighty, new High Chieftain anyway?"

An older warrior nursing a still seeping gash in his upper arm replied wearily, "What does it matter? We'll all be in Annwn by tomorrow's sunset. We can ask the gods to explain the joke then."

The men had reason to despair. Half their warriors lay trampled and broken, carrion offerings to the birds of battle, and tactically they were pressed into a defenseless corner, encircled by dense mountains and Arthur's massive host. Sunrise would see their last contest.

Out of the silent dark, Taliesin entered the circle of orange light and scanned the group for an open space. He looked as weary as his fellows, but for some reason far less despondent.

Accolon made room for him. "Here, Bard. Sit and tell us. Did you see Arthur anywhere?"

Though it was only the month of Hazel and the days still held the full heat of summer, here in the mountains the nights were already beginning to carry the chill breath of autumn. Leaning forward to warm himself, Taliesin rubbed his arms and nodded.

"Arthur was there, but he hung back, *perpetually* ready to replace a fallen man."

Accolon grunted and the other warriors made similar noises of disgust.

"I don't think it was lack of courage," Taliesin added. "It looked like he was being held back...by Merlin."

"What! What's a druid doing on a battlefield?"

"You're not that young, Accolon," the wounded man responded. "You must remember Merlin's done it before. After Uther died."

"Ahww, he was still pawing after his mother's breast then," another teased, but the pervasive gloom of the men cast a shadow over the fun.

Accolon did not offer a response.

Instead a deep voice answered from the darkness, "It doesn't matter how many times Merlin's done it before," and Uryen stepped into the firelight. How long he had been standing, listening in the dark was impossible to say. "What I want to know," he continued as he took a seat opposite

Taliesin, "is exactly what he's doing there now." He looked straight at the bard.

Flames leapt, spit and crackled between the two men.

"I've no ability to analyse strategy."

"Spare me the circumspections of your divided loyalty," Uryen growled, "and just tell me everything you saw."

Taliesin gave no indication that he was in any way troubled by his patron's accusation and only answered mildly, "My words are yours...if they are anyone's."

"What do you suspect, my Lord?" Accolon interjected. "I mean," he glanced briefly at Taliesin, "about the way the battle was fought?"

Slowly, Uryen turned his attention to his man. "You found it strange too, did you?"

"Other than they didn't fight like Romans...yes, there was something..."

Man to man an unspoken question passed around the rest of the group as if each were reassuring himself that he was not the only one to have missed the obvious. Certainly all had been surprised by the enemy's battle style. It was one of the reasons they were at such a disadvantage now. When Uryen's scouts had returned to Caer Leon and reported that Arthur was in Gwent and backed by an army of Gauls and Franks, Uryen and his allies believed they had a reasonable chance for success. The foreign, *Christian* warband Arthur had garnered would undoubtedly fight Roman style with standard, formal positions of attack and defense. They wouldn't be prepared to handle the British way of making war, a disordered and unconstrained lusting for victory. So Uryen had positioned most of his men outside the fortress along the banks of the river Usk in pretense of the usual battle stance, while others waited in ambush. The advantage of surprise, however, had not been his. Arthur's allies attacked with as much ferocious unpredictability as if they were born Britons. Someone had instructed them well. But now, Uryen and Accolon seemed to have seen something else in the enemy's well executed attack.

Cadwallon, the chieftain of Gwynedd, spoke for all. "Just what do the two of you think you noticed?"

Uryen again looked at his bard. "Three of us noticed. Am I wrong, bard?"

Taliesin drew a long breath and shrugged. "I will tell you what I saw, but as I said, I can't guess at its implications."

In three strides Uryen was across to Taliesin. Cruelly, he grabbed the bard by the collar of his mantle and lifted him to his feet.

"Something reeks about this war," Uryen snarled, his face close to Taliesin's. "Reeks more than all the entrails strewn across the field this day, and my guess is that you have the answer. Either in what you saw, or in prior knowledge gained at the feet of that feeble-minded bastard, Arthur. And you're going to tell me everything. I'll not lead my men to a predetermined death."

Accolon jumped up and pushed himself between the two men. "Wait, my Lord, wait. Give him a chance to speak." He took hold of Uryen's arm and faced him unflinchingly.

Gradually, Uryen released his grip on the bard, but not his threatening stance.

Accolon turned to Taliesin. "It's what I thought then. They could have finished us today, but they didn't. That's what you saw."

Nodding slowly, Taliesin rubbed at his throat. "Merlin held everyone back. He stayed as far away as possible from the battlefront, yet it was his commands being passed forward. Yes, they deliberately neglected their advantage. Several times." The bard paused only to confront his patron directly. "And they let you go tonight."

Once more, before Uryen could sputter a response, Accolon interjected. "How could Taliesin have known that was the plan? Merlin's had months to instruct his troops."

"I assure you, my Lord," Taliesin added calmly, "Arthur is not in Merlin's confidence."

Somewhat mollified, Uryen took a step back and considered Taliesin carefully. "But what..." he began, forming the question slowly as it occured to him, "would Merlin have to gain by waiting?"

The bard spoke more softly than he had all night. "I think the question is, what has Merlin to gain by not finishing this war?"

And behind them, softer still, the first red tendrils of sun hinted at new light.

as ripples on water distort so Merlin knew reflections in time would cast favourably on Arthur if he but masked his lust for the kill and let his persecutors go then even they at a distance would see a generous sadly wronged king and speak of his vision to which they had been blind

Early in the month of Bramble, on a day when a stiff wind gleaned the first few withered leaves from deceptively lush trees, Uryen and his men rode into Caer Ysgrifennu. Though the civil war continued, it was now fought with words alone. News that Arthur's troops had routed Uryen and his allies out of Caer Leon and then allowed them to escape had preceded the returning warriors. Nonetheless, they were greeted as heroes by a grateful crowd - they were alive, and home.

The chieftains who had sided with Uryen had returned to their *cantrefs* as well, though rumours already scarred their efforts. Some of them, it was said, had recanted and sided with Arthur's allies rather than have to defend their territory from the Saxons without the aid of neighboring chieftains. If the stories were true, Britain was now torn in half - the *cantrefs* in the south standing behind Arthur and those in the north following Uryen's lead. Of course, every *cantref* had a neighbour and a need for defense. The northern chieftains could only guess at how long it would take this plague of intimidation to take them too, one by one.

Still, on this day in Caer Ysgrifennu spirits were strong and "Arthur" was a word that meant a fool. The main gates of the caer stood open and the people from the village surged in past the thick, stone ramparts to crowd the lanes between the warriors' houses and slap their heroes on the back and say their names. Uryen's banner, a rearing black bear on a background of red, was hung from the gate tower and his name raised in a cheer.

The chieftain was met outside the main hall by his druid, Tegid, and before the grey whisp of a man could greet his chieftain, Uryen was demanding answers.

"I trust, Sage," the chieftain began, tossing the reins of his horse to a waiting man and striding past the druid into the hall. "you can tell me exactly what the advantage is in *any* warleader relinquishing the opportunity to rid himself of his enemy..." He threw his shield, his sword, his cloak, and then his chainmail cuirass to the floor as he headed toward the section of the hall that was his private quarters. Tegid hurried after him, directing another man to retrieve Uryen's discards.

At the doorway, instead of drawing aside the hide and entering his room, Uryen suddenly whirled around to face his advisor. "Where's my son?" All at once he seemed sharply aware of the single servant and the silent hall. "And my wife? She did arrive, didn't she?" Uryen sounded more suspicious than worried.

"Oh...yes," Tegid nodded slowly, his long beard fluttering with his breath. "Three moons ago. And she's actually been quite..."

Before the druid could finish, another, sweeter voice caught Uryen's attention.

"Busy, My Lord...The Lady Morgan has been very busy." The chieftain turned around to see the compliant smile of Enhinti as she held the curtain back and beckoned him to enter.

"Praise be to Lleu and all the gods for your safe return," she breathed, gently placing her small hand on his arm. "You must be tired and sore. I'm preparing a hot bath and I've sent for a meal."

Though Uryen seemed charmed and allowed himself to be led into the warm room, he persisted, "And what exactly has kept Morgan so occupied? Where is she?"

"Well, my Lord," she began shyly, lowering her eyes.

"She's been working ceaselessly in support of your cause," Tegid interrupted, moving around his broad shouldered chieftain to take a central position in the room.

"What?"

His crossed arms hidden in the sleeves of his black robe, Tegid stood gnarled and dark as an old oak, and the shadow his voice cast was benevolent and calm. "Morgan has taken up her Art, but before you make any judgements about that..." Tegid warned off Uryen's frown with a wave of his hand. "You should know that she seems to be using it as a way to speak out against Arthur's claim and in praise of your protest."

Still frowning, the chieftain shook his head. "Seems to be?"

Enhinti looked as though she were going to say something, but went instead to check on the water she'd been heating in a cauldron over the room's small fire pit.

Tegid briefly watched her movements and then continued, "Whenever your wife is called out, and she is almost daily, to the village, the farms, even to some nearby free trefs...she always takes the opportunity to talk with people. Even those she doesn't treat. In truth, she's getting more of a reputation for her words than her potions."

From a large jar Enhinti poured cold water into a waiting wooden tub and then went back to the cauldron. After fanning the steam away from her face she bent over to gather her skirt up on both sides and tuck the hem into her belt so that she could move more freely. She caught Uryen appraising her legs and did not look away.

"And," Uryen forced his attention back to Tegid and his wife's activities. "These words are for me? You're sure?"

"They're against the Christians," Enhinti interjected.

Tegid gave her a sharp look.

She simply shrugged. "That's what I hear." Unhesitantly, rhythmically, she came towards Uryen and when she was quite near she dropped to her knees. "May I help you with your boots, my Lord?"

"What you hear. What you hear!" Tegid had lost his patience. "Morgan's speaking *against* the alliance."

Enhinti shrugged again without taking her eyes off Uryen. Rubbing his beard, Uryen looked from one to the other and back again. After a long moment, and in long, slow tones he asked Tegid, "Is that where she is now? In the village, yes?
"And so..." he turned to Enhinti, "where is my son?"

Somewhat disconcerted, Enhinti rose and answered perhaps more sharply than she intended. "He's with her. She always has him with her now."

"She's always been a good mother," Tegid added bitingly.

Again Uryen studied them, paying particular attention to how Enhinti avoided meeting the druid's glare.

"I see," he said, turning away from both the druid and the woman to pace a few steps past the tub, his bed and the trophies on the wall, looking at nothing. "Yes, I see. Well--" abruptly he turned back to them.

"This is all quite good news I think, Advisor. And I'm anxious to hear more of what you have to say. But right now you could leave me to this good, hot bath and," he smiled at Enhinti, "a meal you said?"

Enhinti nodded eagerly. Tegid, however, remained where he was, unwavering, solemn as Enhinti gave him a fleeting, self-satisfied smile.

"You *could* leave me, Tegid. We'll talk later."

Obviously still reluctant, but with a respectful nod, Tegid finally did as he was told.

Before the druid was out of the room, Enhinti hurried to finish preparing the bath. Uryen watched as she poured the water into the tub and, depositing the empty cauldron on the floor, wiped the back of her hand across her forehead to smooth back a stray lock of hair. Her face was rosy from the steam and the effort, and a trickle of dampness darkened her linen gown between her breasts.

Slowly Uryen pulled his tunic over his head.

Dabbling her fingers in the water to test its temperature, she leaned over, revealing the fluid white curve of her breasts and the dark sweet space between them. And as she ran her damp fingers slowly along her bottom lip, she urged softly, "It's ready."

Bare chested, wearing only his braccae and boots, Uryen walked unhesitatingly toward her, reached around to grab a handful of hair at the nape of her neck and pulled her close. "All this," he whispered harshly against her ear, "is to entice me," with his free hand he stroked the roundness of her hip and thigh, "to *listen* to what you have to say." Roughly he thrust her away from him and looked down into her startled face. "So...say it."

Even though Morgan knew Uryen and his warband had returned, she remained in the village to finish tending to her patient. The man's hair was slick with the sweat of pain, but Morgan smoothed it back tenderly off his forehead time and time again. When he could still work he'd been a potter, a rare craft in the north and one he'd learned from his grandfather long ago on the fog-swept southern shores of Dumnonia. Recently his wife had moved his bed across the small hut so that he could look out the doorway at his kiln. Though he had his eyes closed at present, Morgan knew he was seeing how much kneading, pulling and coaxing the clay would require to change under his hands into a crudely beautiful vessel. It was how he fought the pain, to imagine the designs he would create tomorrow.

Though his wife begged her for a potion to ease his agony, Morgan refused saying that she had nothing for it. The truth was, what she did have would cloud his mind so much that his clay and water and even his hands would vanish. Losing who he was would be a worse agony.

"What about this? What'll this do?" The old woman held a shaking hand out to Morgan, offering back what Morgan had just given her.

Morgan placed both hands over the woman's cold fingers. "That's Restharrow. Boil it in water and get him to drink it. As much as he can. It will help him pass his water."

"This will cure him then?"

Morgan patted the woman's shoulder reassuringly. "It will help him." It was all she could do.

As she ducked to go through the door, the woman stopped her. "But, you haven't said how we shall pay you. Here," the woman reached for a small stack of what must have been some of his last work, and handed Morgan a dish with a delicate finger-pinched decoration along its rim.

"No, no," Morgan kindly waved the offer away. "I don't take any payment. But I will ask that you pay tribute to Modron, and petition her to make our British blood strong."

In answer the woman looked back at her husband and rubbed at the ribbed edge of the pot still in her hand.

"I know you can only think about him, now," Morgan consoled. "So consider this. Everything he worked at, knew or felt, everything he was, still is , is in jeopardy. We all face the same threat these days: the possibility of losing all that we are."

Gently she placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. Morgan could sense the weary anger in this small, old woman. The potter's wife had worried too much already; she didn't want to think about anything else. But Morgan felt strongly that if every Briton took one night to stand in the moonlight and speak to the gods, if each voice were raised in praise of who it was, the British spirit would never be extinguished.

"Do it for him," she concluded and quietly left the woman to her thoughts.

Stepping outside, Morgan looked anxiously around for her son, who had been playing right in front of the hut just a moment ago. She found him between the potter's hut and the next, playing in the slop cast off from daily living with three pigs which found the area equally intriguing.

"Owein!" She scooped him up and held the filthy boy at arm's distance.

From behind, a voice suddenly rushed over her. "I think you should wait until he is bigger than the pigs before you send him off to learn how to be a swineherd."

Astride his horse, gold hair tangling, shimmering in the wind, Taliesin beamed down at her. The depth of the delight she felt at seeing him again surprised her.

"You don't look surprised to see me." He passed her his cloak to wrap around Owein.

"Surprised? No, I heard you had all returned. I think the entire village has run up there, haven't they?" She nodded in the direction of the Caer.

Gently smiling, Taliesin slid off his horse and went to her, wrapping her up in his arms. He smelled of leather and sun and part of her wanted to stand there like that forever. The other part felt awkward, as if she were being hugged by a family member she had never met, and she wanted to pull away. She remembered the changes she'd seen in him.

He rubbed her shoulders and the top of Owein's head. "I thought you'd like a ride back."

A twinge of apprehension pinched her as Uryen's broad, darkly bearded face appeared before her. "He's waiting, I take it."

With a brush of his hand along her cheek, Taliesin comforted, "No. I came because I couldn't wait to see you. I missed you very much Morgan."

Those words. How easy it would be to believe them and think that something other than friendship might still be possible. She studied his eyes. They were like a summer sky, full of clear blue promise. No, she told herself, look beyond to the clouds that gather there inside him. The ones that keep him from the warmth of love or hope. He had missed her, yes. But not the way she wanted him to.

She kissed his cheek quickly and climbed onto his horse, securing Owein in front of her.

Truth was, she missed Taliesin more than she could express. And seeing him now, after three moons, reminded her that she felt the lack of him even more when he was present. Ever since that night in Carlisle when he'd confessed his tortuous doubt about whether or not the gods could inspire or reveal anything to mortals, took any interest, or even existed at all, Morgan had watched him change. Or maybe it was that things changed between them. Anyway, she'd tried to forgive him his despair, even understand it. The gods knew, it was the mutual sense of loneliness more than the bond of the Art that had nurtured their friendship. Now his loneliness, which had fostered his doubt and now his new fascination with the Christians, was taking him further and further away from her.

Settling himself once more in the saddle, he reached around her to gather the reins and she deliberately nestled against his chest to take comfort in the circle of his arms.

She could pretend for a moment, at least, that he was her lover and her friend, that they shared hope and dreams and understanding. Despite the gathering distance between them, he was, after all, still the one closest to her. Maybe, the thought burst open in her like a warm, iridescent egg, maybe her newfound strength could help heal his wounded heart too, and bring him back home.

She let the tender heat of her son in her arms and the warm breath of Taliesin on her hair lull her then, as they rode slowly up the heath to Caer Ysgrifennu.

Enhinti drew a wool blanket around her shoulders to protect her from the room's growing chill, while Uryen, still naked to the waist, stood comfortably beside the cooling waters of his unused bath with his arms crossed.

"It's just that," she fumbled to find the right words, "well, there's been such a change in her. And, I suppose, because I'm closer to her than most, I see what others might not."

Uryen looked questioningly at her. "Meaning Tegid."

Now that Enhinti had begun, she drew courage from her flow of words and spoke with increasing authority. "I think Tegid is swayed by her devotion to her Art. Sudden though it is."

Their conversation was interrupted by three servants bringing in Uryen's meal. From the cook hut adjacent to the hall they brought in a platter of boiled pork, barley bread and strong cheese, and a jug of beer. One man arranged a pelt by the hearth for Uryen to sit on, another placed the food beside it and poured the beer, while the third built up the fire. Then, with a nod they were gone as suddenly as they came.

Uryen made no move towards his food. As Enhinti bent to fuss a little more with the arrangement of his plate and cup, he frowned. "Leave it. And get to your point."

Calmly smoothing her skirt, which was again ankle length, she rose to face him. "Doesn't it make you wonder, my Lord, why Lady Morgan would suddenly become so dedicated to the training she previously abandoned before she finished in order to marry you?"

"No. Seems to me she's always been more inclined to it than anything else. And as far as I know she finished her training. She wasn't young when I married her."

"She never took her final vows. She's not sanctioned."

Uryen gave her a piercing look. "How do you know so much about it?"

Slowly, she came closer to him and lowered her voice. "Morgan petitioned Lile for permission to practice, right after we received the news about her brother's claim. I know because I overheard a messenger from Lile who came to see Morgan at Caer Leon...just before Beltaine. The message was that Morgan was welcome anytime."

Enhinti's eyes glistened blackly. "The Lady Lile does support Arthur."

"If you think that telling me these are my wife's sympathies is news..." he snorted impatiently and started to turn away. "Tegid told me something of interest."

Grabbing his arm, she spoke more urgently, yet lowered her words until they were a harsh whisper. "Don't you see? Her message to Lile is proof that she is against you, no matter what she says in the village or anywhere else! The words she speaks in praise of your rebellion begin and end on her lips. They're not in her heart."

"You're not making sense," he growled, shaking her off. "Why would she say those things then?"

On tiptoe, very close to his ear, peering anxiously at the brief flutter of the hide over the doorway, Enhinti answered him. "It's insidious. Her Art and the words the people want to hear right now...she's using both to gain power for herself. She helps them and they listen to her. Soon they'll listen to anything she has to say."

"This is ridiculous." He held her roughly, pulling her close to his face. "You're saying that I have an enemy who, in order to hurt me, is helping me. I've had enough of this," he finished gruffly, pushing her away.

Just then Morgan entered the room. She couldn't have been there long enough to overhear anything Enhinti had said because she only commented, "Hello, Uryen. It's not like you to push a pretty woman away, though it is good to see you still whole and healthy enough to have your pick."

Without a glance at Enhinti, Morgan walked directly over to her husband and stood on tip toe herself to kiss him on the cheek. "Welcome home."

Then she turned calmly to the woman, "I can see to his comforts now. Thank you, Enhinti."

Uryen raised an eyebrow, but both waited to say anything further until Enhinti had left the room.

"And you're usually not so..." Uryen searched for the word, "cordial."

Morgan dismissed his comment with a tight smile. "There's someone outside who's eager to see you. And he's more in need of a bath than you...which is saying something."

"What's he doing out there? I expected to see my son when I arrived. Bring him in."

Morgan left to retrieve Owein from Taliesin, who was waiting outside in the sunshine. "It's alright," she whispered to the bard as she gathered Owein into her arms.

On Morgan's return, Uryen was already in his bath. He reached out when he saw his son and smiled widely. "Come here, boy. Your mother can scrub both our backs."

After father and son were dried and dressed, Uryen said, "Have someone look after him for a while."

This time when Morgan returned, Uryen was eating, and he'd obviously found his own servants to dispose of his bath. "Come," he patted the furs he sat on. "Are you hungry?"

Sitting stiffly beside him, Morgan poured herself some beer. "I assume you have something you want to talk about," she said, taking a sip.

"How a woman of your age can be so dour," he took a deep swallow of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "is beyond me. What makes you think I want to talk? Maybe I just wanted to be alone with my wife."

"Why?"

With a look, Uryen asked her if she were really that stupid.

"Uryen," she said irritatedly, shaking her head in disbelief, "you haven't been near me in months."

He shrugged, "I haven't been home in months."

"You know I'm talking about before we went to Caer Leon. As I recall," Morgan lost a little of her control and almost spat out the last words, "you said you didn't relish having a snake in your bed."

"Maybe I've changed my mind."

With that her anger flared and she made a quick move to stand, but he caught her by the wrist.

"No...Morgan," surprised by her reaction, the warrior struggled to explain himself. "I mean, from what I hear, I might have been wrong. You know, to make that comparison."

She stopped resisting him and waited.

"Might have been," he stressed, "if you really are out there, working against your brother. Are you? Are you on my side after all?"

Settling a little, Morgan drew a deep breath and studied her hands. Finally she said, "Alright I'll explain myself. I only hope that you'll listen." She looked up at him and saw that he did indeed seem to be listening.

"We heard that Arthur's army is made up of Franks and Gauls," she continued. "Aid from foreign, Christian kings who are eager to help install another Christian ruler."

Uryen nodded to indicate that what she'd heard was true, but otherwise remained impassive.

"With my every breath," Morgan leaned forward, clenching her fists against her knees, "I speak against this Christian alliance - this foreign threat to everything Briton. Practising my Art is my way of bringing the goddesses to the hearts and minds of everyone I meet. And my words encourage them to fight for their British heart as courageously as their chieftain."

Uryen watched her and slowly stroked his beard. When she didn't say anything more, he only asked, "That's all?"

"What?"

He seemed amused by her shocked expression. "I mean...you're finished trying to convince me?"

Before she could get angry again, he added hastily, "Those are fine words. Very fine. But you know action says more to me." He put his hand up under her hair and pulled her closer.

"Show me you're on my side. Convince me without words." He ran his other hand up along her thigh, over her hip to her lower back, and then lifted her slightly to lay her down on the straw.

What he saw was her abashed but welcoming smile. What he didn't see as he moved on top of her were her fists, clenched until the knuckles were bloodless, battling the air above him.

a rare woman   whose name the gods spoke   could gain
admission to   the cavern of thirteen oaks   where Lile
met   the druidic high circle   their sacred grove
nightwashed by midnight snow   poised in predatory clumps
along entwined branches   and underneath they stood
thirteen shadows hanging from the filtered moon   the
archdruid addressed her accusation   claiming salvation
from the saxon threat may be   in the blood of this briton
son returned   and in his mediation between briton's
battered heart and the grant of blessed peace   that
Merlin called no christian god his own   nor betrayed as
they could see   our spirit by conceding   one more god
must be praised on british soil   so still warranted his
druidic name   and Lile saw them then   like bats who
when silent are blind   forbidden by their fear of
Merlin's dark bargains   they remained   undemanding
and so fell prey instead   to his voice   and she
alone was left to hear   the name of their destruction

The faces surrounding Morgan grew indistinct in the gathering darkness, and the heedless rush of falling snow absorbed all depth of sound. Before the grey, empty eyes of her audience she watched as each of her words fell and was swiftly covered by the cold sweep of their fear.

In this the second winter of the civil war, with Uryen and his exhausted, depleted warband again forced to stay at Caer Ysgrifennu and defend the borders of Rheged from the Saxons who unrelentingly battered at Rheged's vulnerable and unallied status, the people's fear forbade them thought. They knew only the immediate threat to their homesteads and fields, families and friends.

Morgan feared their narrow vision and was determined to clear it, yet they remained huddled against only the current storm. She reached out to one man, lumpish and thick, and demanded, "Don't you understand? It's not just a question of accepting one more god. If we relent and allow Arthur's reign with its condition of Christianity, then Christianity will become a political force in Britain. The strongest political force. And we will again be ruled by foreign minds and hearts."

The wind swept her words up in a swirl of snow and the man, securing himself against the gust, silently turned towards his home. Morgan raised her voice to hold the rest of her audience in place. "That will be the outcome of this Christian alliance. It's already apparent. Arthur has relinquished his British title and is calling himself "king", as they do in other Christian nations. And he has sworn allegiance to an alien will: the Pope, who is based in Rome. The Rome that supressed us is long dead, but Christianity contains the same threat. If that religion governs us, we no longer govern ourselves."

Ceaselessly the wind pulled at those who remained, claiming them too. Morgan did not stay to watch the small crowd disperse, but turned away as well to trudge back up the snow crusted trail to the caer.

Dejected, almost defeated, she told herself their story. They did not remember the persecutions and destruction of the British way of life under the Romans. Why should they? She did not. The British revival had begun long before their birth and so it was as if it were eternal, unchanging. But she, unlike most in the crowds she faced, had been educated enough to know how Rome, first with Jupiter, Apollo and the divine Caesars and then with Christianity, had smothered the British spirit.

It was because you could not separate the British gods from what made the Briton nation. The gods influenced philosophy and policy through the guiding hand of the druids, and from that came the British forms of government and society. All laws, all attitudes of the British people came from their vision of the Eternal Circle, and that resided with and in their gods.

The Romans had known that, understood that they could not conquer the British systems of government and install their own without surplanting the British gods.

Unfortunately another particularly British trait was their unquestioning tolerance of the beliefs of others. Morgan herself still occasionally felt guilty for being so critical, so uncompromising. Every Briton had been raised to know the names of a hundred gods - patron gods of water and rock, forest and meadow, and the higher gods of season and cycle. Now there were those again who had a god called Christ as their patron. So?

So the danger was, as Morgan saw it, that these worshippers of Christ tolerated no other gods. In fact, it seemed it was the Christians' mandate to eradicate the names of all other gods and replace them with one single power. A power so alien she could not imagine the ramifications of its absolute influence.

The only similarity that she could see between her own understanding of the gods and the Christians' was that both could claim a personal relationship, or at least the possibility of one, with their gods. But there the exchange stopped. Oh, and she could understand how a god could save someone. Modron had saved her.

The real source of trouble, she believed, lay in the British concept of right and wrong compared to the Christian one. Under British law, an act could only be known by its outcome. No action was absolutely good or bad, no judgement could be made until the result of that action could be clearly seen. The Christians, however, understood the world in terms of something they called sin. Acts were absolutely defined as right or wrong before they even occurred; and *divine* judgement, not mortal, was ultimately to be feared. Except somehow the forgiving nature of this god called Christ changed all that.

Morgan found all this rather murky. If their god was all-forgiving, why did they divide their world into good and evil? Whatever the reason, she could see this dichotomy coming into unresolvable conflict with British law, and it made her sick to think of any British ruler trying to negotiate between the two much less a manipulated boy named Arthur.

Ahead, the storm almost obscured even the daunting fortifications of Caer Ysgrifennu, now nothing but a spectral grey dragon curled like a whisp of smoke at the edge of the cliffs. Morgan trudged on, knowing it was still there.

in the dawn of summer's flush Arthur strode full of
promise and pride persuaded that he held the fruition
of britain in the gleam of his sword raised that day
for the battle of badon where Merlin made certain
Arthur's victory directing him to fight the saxon hoard
the enemy's way unhorsed and grounded in offense yet
Arthur found the execution too complex and neglected
unforseen advantage till Kei concerned by needless
death risked showing him his error and the way to
swift conclusion then Arthur at the victory cry hid
his fear of insufficiency in the warmth of adulation
and his hope for love withered under the cold clouds
in Merlin's eyes

Two years after Arthur's sanctioning, the progress of civil war took an abrupt turn, just as Merlin had planned.

Arthur had ripened under Merlin's tutelage and was, by his sixteenth summer, bold, confident, and not only battle-hungry but even more consumed by an appetite for praise and pleasure. The gods, for their own reasons, had in addition granted him astonishing good looks, the kind that awarded charisma even when there was no personality. So, with Merlin's intelligence and strategic abilities guiding him, Arthur seemed the consummate hero, rushing in at exactly the right moment to save the integrity of Britain.

The battle of Badon was Arthur's first astounding victory. He had come unsolicited to the aid of Lot in Gododdin and prevented the certain fall of that cantref to the Saxons. This sudden good will was not, as was made known, because Arthur could no longer stand to see the steady plunder of British land and had decided to ignore past hostilities in favour of helping his Briton brothers. It was the careful contrivance of Merlin, who alone could watch the slow destruction of the country and wait until the perfect opportunity for hero-making presented itself. Gododdin was on the northern Saxon frontier, positioned where help was not easily got but most sorely needed. The Britons' first line of defense in the northeast, was now saved by Arthur.

And brilliantly saved. Arthur had commanded his troops to unhorse and fight like the Saxons, on foot. Even though British warbands had no experience in forging an assault that way, they gained an unexpected advantage. Because British saddles did not have stirrups, charging with a lance into the fray meant every warrior risked being unhorsed suddenly by the impact of riding down a footsoldier. On foot, what ground they gained, they held, lance in hand, aim sure. The Saxons were unprepared and overwhelmed.

In the flush of victory, no one doubted that the new tactic was Arthur's inspiration alone. Though Merlin had accompanied the troops to the battlefield, druids, everyone knew, were advisors of political not battle strategy. They were not trained in war tactics. That was the prowess of a war-chief. And Arthur's recent display of such prowess proved him to be, absolutely, Britain's promised champion.

Merlin prowled restlessly around the encampment, showing no interest in celebrating along with the warriors. Everywhere campfires shone on revelers in mid drink or mid laugh, a sprawling, flickering mosaic of victory which the druid viewed occasionally with disdain.

No one noticed. All were determinedly saturating themselves with life and shedding the taint of death. They breathed, they laughed, they drank, they made love in their still bloodied clothes as if the essence of their enemy had made them invulnerable. And the women from the village and the farms, and even some from the distant caer, crowded there too, feasting on relief.

Merlin walked across the field until he was alone and could gaze up at Gododdin's Caer Eidyn. While all caers were built on a hilltop or rise of land, Caer Eidyn was a rare sight. It clung with iron claws to a perch of stone, an almost vertical rise of rock that tolerated no twig or bush and barely allowed a thin trail to carve an access to the top. The Saxons could have ravaged all of the *cantref* , but they would only have won the starved-out corpses of the caer.

Those thick stone walls sheltered few this night. the chieftain's *teulu* and their families had all come down to join the celebrations. So perhaps Merlin was pondering the absence of the chieftain himself - Lot, husband to Morgan's sister Margawse - who had finally sworn his allegiance to Arthur on Badon's blood-filled field.

It was said the aging chieftain had been wounded and needed to rest.

Merlin watched the darkened aerie without expression and then smiled slowly to himself. He had just conquered the fortress without shedding one drop of sweat.

Returning to the encampment, he made his way to the tent he shared with Arthur. The celebrants had not lessened in their enthusiasm, and the clamour they raised was as loud as the clash of battle.

Placing one narrow hand on the tent flap, Merlin paused to look over the crowd once more. A chill whisp of wind, intrusive in the summer air, lifted the back of his hair and was gone.

Merlin had not hovered over Arthur this night. Instead he had see the advantage in letting the warriors view Arthur as a man who stood alone, and allowed the new hero to claim his praise as he wished. So the druid didn't know about the game Arthur had played with a bronze haired woman who danced in the firelight.

She'd seen a young man, strong and vital who watched her hips as they swayed and offered. And he'd pulled her down on his lap, laughing when she asked him his name.

When Merlin entered the tent he saw the lamplight reflected on white, writhing skin, heard the urgent breath of pleasure, and suddenly recognized the pale profile at Arthur's neck.

Grabbing a jug of beer which stood next to the doorway, Merlin tossed the icy contents on the small of Arthur's back and hollered. But Arthur was already locked in the shudder of completion. The druid reached for Arthur's hair just as Arthur flung himself back in delayed reaction to the shock of the beer. Merlin caught hold anyway and spat in his face. "What are you doing? Do you know what you've done? She's your sister. Your SISTER!"

Holly

Tree of Increase

The flash of a summer storm ignited the air and a thunderous rain instantly began to pound the earth. Without even a parting nod to the family she'd been talking to, Morgan pulled her cloak over her head and ran the remaining distance to her hut. Once inside, she hurriedly secured the flap over the doorway, stamped the rain from her shoes and went to urge her fire back to life. Flames budded, then bloomed along the charred logs, filling the room with fumes of warmth. Morgan remained squatted before them, rubbing her hands, feeling the embrace of the fire and the familiar surroundings.

This was her house, had been since the conflict with Arthur began when she took the extra space to make a home for her Art. In the beginning she had used the hut mostly as a store room, but now as the civil war continued through a third summer, it was her place of ceremony and refuge, craft and contemplation.

She gazed lovingly around at the ropes of dried leaves and flowers hanging on the walls; the jars and bowls of powders and oils, essence and ash arranged by whether their strength was from the waxing or waning moon; the quick blades of ceremony and harvest gleaming on the table near the hand-high statues of the goddesses who watched over her bed.

She and Owein stayed here when Uryen was otherwise occupied. The constant battering of Rheged's borders by the Saxons and lately the Irish kept Uryen away from the caer most of the time. During his absences Morgan made a point of sleeping in the main hall to show her support for his efforts. It was on the nights when he was in the Caer and with one of his other women that she slept here, and did so without regret.

Morgan stood to remove her damp cloak and drape it before the fire to dry. Wryly, she considered the fact that she could be a rich woman by now if she'd claimed all the fines due her. It was a valid law, she supposed, for those who felt their home or security threatened by the extra- marital interests of their spouse. However, for her, making a formal complaint to the tribal council and negotiating for the cow or sheep or whatever award they ultimately determined as her compensation was too much effort for something she cared little about. She honestly was not concerned over Uryen taking other lovers; as long as he forgot about her.

He did not entirely, of course, demanding she play at wife now that her allegiances seemed right. Her lack of enthusiasm was not lost on him, however, and he was increasingly willing to acknowledge the limbo their marriage had fallen into. As if it had ever been anything else. She had always found intimacy impossible with him because he never heard her real desires, her hope or her pain. It was only recently, though, that she understood her antagonism and refused to pretend otherwise.

She went over to a rope of crosswort, picked up a small bowl which lay beneath it, and started to rub the withered yellow petals from their stems.

The only regret she had was that she would never have any more children. Still, she had based that decision on the truth of her own precarious political involvements, ones that would not change and would most certainly reflect on any other children, as they did on Owein. So she used her Art to harvest the force of the waning moon, that which governed the declining half of the Eternal Circle, and drank deeply.

Uryen was with her too infrequently to question her infertility, and besides, he had enough children outside of his marriage to make him feel vital and confident.

Carrying the filled bowl back to the fire, she thought tenderly of Owein and then of the little girl whom she had just been called away to treat. Owein was finally, at three years old, beginning to be safe from some of childhood's most dangerous ailments. When she last saw him a short while ago, was happily playing with the other children near the stables. The rain had probably driven them inside now to roll and jump and giggle in the hay.

Before she sat again, she stopped to listen to the storm.

The wind had suddenly shifted and the rain began to beat against the hide over her doorway. The covering, though, seemed secure. She eased herself down, pulled the bowl into her lap and began to crush the petals between her fingers into a fine dust. Crosswort, a waning herb, when mixed with water made an excellent wash for any wound or sore. There was always need of it.

Usually Morgan kept her son with her, against the advice of virtually every other woman in the caer. They, however, were ignorant of her kind of fear - a heart-drenching dread whenever she thought about Owein's future. Sometimes the horrible feeling that she should not miss one moment of her time with her son, that it would all too soon be gone, would not let her go. She supposed it came from her concern that she had no solid support to shield him with except her own strength. Not one word of explanation had come from Lile in all these months; and the hole of doubt that festered in Morgan concerning Lile's possible collusion with Merlin, no salve could ease.

Doubt. She had come to own so much lately, she was beginning to understand Taliesin. Except her doubt only concerned people.

Her fingertips and the thin white lines of her nails were now sun yellow. She rubbed the powder from her hands into the bowl and the rest on her skirt.

It seemed everyone in her life was a whisp of something they pretended not to be. Daily she expected Uryen's tolerance to disappear and his suspicions to return. Taliesin had recently made a pact with her not to discuss Christianity any more because increasingly he found ways to defend it. And then there was Enhinti - sweet, helpful, viperous Enhinti. Why she had made those slanderous remarks about Morgan to Uryen was beyond Morgan's analysis, but Morgan had kept herself from the woman as much as possible ever since. Morgan would have dismissed Enhinti altogether, but Uryen liked having her nearby, close to his bed.

As if seeking her out, a cold tail of rain and wind lashed through the bottom corner of the flap, tearing it free, and parted the flames to coil around her legs. Morgan leapt up and dashed to resecure her doorway. As she bent to tie it down, she saw the slick leather of boots outside.

"Morgan, are you there?" called a man's voice.

Accolon. A perversely satisfying addition to her life lately, Accolon was kinsman to Enhinti and increasingly fond of Morgan. It was a situation Morgan was hardly prepared for. No one except Taliesin had ever shown her the slightest interest - well, why should they? She knew her features were at best, unremarkable. Yet here was a member of Uryen's teulu following her around like a dog after a bowl of scraps. She wondered whether or not he had heard her and if she should answer.

It was Taliesin who first pointed out Accolon's attraction to her. Over the past year and a half, the two men had developed a friendship, and so it came to be commonplace for Accolon to join Taliesin and Morgan on rides, or walks, and on many late night talks. Morgan had been too occupied marvelling that her solitary bard had actually cultivated a friend to notice anything else. Finally Taliesin had taken her aside and said that he thought Accolon liked her a good deal more than he liked him.

It made Morgan feel anxious and happy and angry all at the same time because she was not sure she could find a place for, or even trust that kind of attachment in her life right now. Much less from Enhinti's cousin. But that was not fair. She hated being judged by the deeds of her relatives. She untied the hide once more, stood, and held it back to greet him.

"You're soaked! What are you doing out in this?" Even before she finished her question, she realized from his expression that he had come with urgent news.

"Didn't you hear the messenger ride in? He was calling it out at every door."

Unexpectantly, a shiver ran through Morgan. "No. The storm. I couldn't hear. What was it?" She grabbed his elbow. "What?"

Beyond Accolon's wild eyes, Morgan saw the people of the caer darting from their homes through the rain and the mud to the main hall.

"It's Lot of Gododdin. He's reneged and sworn himself to Arthur."

A sudden blast of rain hit Morgan fully from head to toe, drenching her in cold.

Uryen wearily rubbed his hand across his eyes. "I see no point to your circumspections now, Tegid. The situation is simple enough."

"My training insists I consider everything," the druid bristled. "Nothing is simple."

At that the chieftain rose to pace his hall, sternly meeting the eyes of each member of his *teulu* .

They were at council, their session measured out in the long, heavy trail of smoke and sweat that wound around them. Each man bore the pallor of constant battle and loss, a weary grey of skin and spirit, even though more than half of the twenty six present were young, unseasoned replacements for the fallen, long-time intimates of the chieftain.

Above them Uryen's black and red banners fluttered in the fire's rising heat, and the walls were crowded with the shields and weapons garnered from a hundred successful battles. Yet the room was filled with desperation and fear.

"But you're not advising us to do anything," one of the warriors complained, driving his knife into the dirt in front of his crossed legs.

"I'm advising you to think about all the ramifications."

"What about this then, Advisor," the young warrior continued. "We harness the Saxon's desire to keep British territories divided and vulnerable and side with them temporarily against Arthur."

Several men shouted in disgust.

"Think man," Accolon explained evenly. "Saxon aid in return for what? What would they gain? All they want is our land. I'm sure they would be more than eager to help us eliminate Arthur's troops. It would make it easier for them to overtake us afterward."

"So you think we should follow Lot's lead, then."

Accolon turned to answer the new questioner. "I think..." he began, with a glance to his chieftain, "that we should consider what Tegid has to say. We will be losing a great deal by conceding to Arthur."

With a roar, Uryen yanked one of the shields off the wall and heaved it across the room. "Enough! I've listened enough!"

His clenched fists raised to every man, he lowered his voice to its most commanding strength.

"I won't lose any more men to a war our enemy refuses to fight. For two years I've had to sacrifice my best warriors to those carrion-eating Saxons, while Arthur and his allies were content to watch them pick away at us.

"We won't last till the end of the season." His steps were measured as he came back to stand in the middle of the circle. "We don't have the men. By all the gods, children are working the fields! And now Arthur wants to send us assistance. Forgive and forget."

He snorted at the absurdity. "Why not? He has Gododdin, our nearest and best ally. And very nearly everyone else."

"But he saved that *cantref* ," one young warrior blurted. "Yes," Uryen answered. "And now he wants to save us."

The chieftain's eyes held a cold fire and sweat dampened his moustache. "There's nothing to debate here." He met each man's eyes in turn. "Will we or will we not take his help. We no longer have the luxury of dissent." He stopped at Tegid.

The druid opened his mouth.

"No!" Uryen cut him off before he could say a word. "My first duty is to protect the people and the lands of Rheged. I swore to fight against this Christian dominion because of its threat to our political structure."

He turned back to readdress his men. "In Gaul, Christianity has been used to preserve Roman ways. I didn't want to see Britain return to that...nor see the loss of power it would mean to every independent chieftian." He held his hands open to them. "Now it looks as if we won't exist at all without it."

Not one muscle or sinew in his body showed any sign of defeat. If he surrendered any part of himself then, he kept it in a dark corner of his heart. All his strength remained vibrantly before them and his words fell solid as stone.

"I won't lead Rheged into the void. Better its people stand under a Christian Britain...than not at all."

The men looked one to the other in absolute silence. Only the flames of their dying fire sputtered and snapped between them.

Uryen waited until each man held his own council once more and then asked, "Are we agreed?"

One after the other, the warriors drew their swords and laid them in the dirt at their feet.

As soon as Morgan learned the *teulu* had vacated the main hall, she ran to speak with Uryen. She found him in their quarters, hurriedly packing."What are you doing?" With one hand she held back the flap over the door, supporting herself against the frame.

He acknowledged her with only a cursory look up. "Good. You're here. I was just going to send for you."

Morgan suddenly felt sick and took a few steps forward.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped at her tone, saw her suspicion and tossed the saddlebag he'd been filling to the ground.

"Morgan, I want you to try and understand something --"

"Don't use that tone with me. I don't need to be patronized. If I don't understand what I'm seeing it's because it makes no sense!" She picked up the saddlebag and held it out as evidence.

In all her agonized speculations during the entire night between receiving the news and hearing that Uryen had finally dismissed his *teulu* , Morgan had not once imagined that she would find Uryen packing. Seeing him at it now made her feel sick, as sick as if she had discovered him succumbing to some sort of cowardice.

He snatched the bag back. "The civil war is over. Is that direct enough for you? I am going to Caer Leon to acknowledge Arthur and make my peace."

Worse! she told herself. Even worse! A vast, numbing distance grew up between her and his words. It protected her from falling, from rushing at him, from screaming out.

"To *acknowledge* him? What, by all the gods are you prepared to say?"

"That I was wrong. And that I see now that his reign is in Britain's best interest." He looked at her with empty eyes. "What else?"

All night she had heard people talking about how magnanimous Arthur was to save Gododdin while Lot was still his enemy. They babbled on and on about how it proved that Arthur truly wanted to preserve the integrity of Britain after all and was not working with the Christians to undermine it. It had been as though all her words to win them over the past two years had been dissolved in a single phrase: the Battle of Badon.

She had immediately understood that Rheged would now be forced to surrender. No one was left to stand with them. It had never occurred to her, however, that Uryen would personally surrender his beliefs as well.

"I can't believe this. After you've fought against it so hard and so long."

He rubbed his eyes wearily and sighed. Briefly she was aware that she'd never heard him do that before.

"No one's fought Arthur's warband since we were routed out of Caer Leon. Remember? Our only battles have been futile attempts to keep the Saxons from our hearths. Would you rather be hauled off to live as a slave in one of those long barns the Saxons call houses? They sleep with their pigs and cattle, you know. And that's where you'll be by winter if I don't go to Caer Leon now."

Morgan shook her head in pain and anger."I was talking about the Christian alliance. How can you turn around and concede to it now? "

With unnecessary force, Uryen stuffed another tunic into the sack. He looked at her with pained eyes, but his tone was harsh.

"This is a matter of survival, not idealism. Britain will have an even better defense against invasion with allied strength in Gaul." He gave up his packing once more in frustration, tossed the sack onto the bed, and went over to where his sword was hanging on the wall. He looked at it blankly for a moment and then turned back to her, gesturing emphatically with his open hands.

"Don't you see? It's the only action I can take. And I'm not conceding anything. Rheged's lands will be maintained, its homes and crops and cattle. By my oath."

Pulling the sword down he held it loosely, point to the ground, before sheathing it at his belt.

This was not the Uryen she knew, so shaken, tired, almost defeated in his demeanor, and all at once she was profoundly angry with him.

"Uryen," she placed an urgent hand on his arm, "you're forgetting that Merlin is awarding lands to the Christians. Lands that they will certainly want to expand, and govern in their own way. Our land! What's the difference between that and the Saxons seizing it?"

Sharply, he grasped her shoulders, almost lifting her off the ground. "I'm not a fool Morgan. By all the gods, I have a clearer understanding of this than you. So spare me from one of your speeches." Then he let her go just as roughly, pushed past her to the doorway and barked for a servant to come and get his things.

"And," he pointed a warning finger, "you can spare everyone else from now on too. Your campaign ends with mine."

She had never before feared his anger. Never during any of their many arguments. But here was a man she didn't know, with foreign eyes, and suddenly she was afraid. So she said nothing, while inside she swore that she would never relent. Her body only betrayed her thoughts a little as she crossed her arms.

The silence seemed to calm him and he ran his hand through his hair. "I don't understand you. My reparation with Arthur will make things easier for you - with Lile, with your brother and, what's more, it will secure Owein. Hasn't he been your main concern? My recanting now will mean that he can later make a claim as Arthur's heir with impunity. Shouldn't you be relieved at that?"

"Relieved for my son's future?" Morgan smiled without humour and shook her head. "I don't think his will be that simple. He might instead be considered Arthur's black heir, one who is likely to follow his father's original path when time and strength were right."

She took a deep breath and moved her crossed arms around to hold herself tightly. Ridiculous as it might be, she still wanted to try and reach the man, the strong, indomitable Briton she knew was there. "Still, I pray you're right about

Owein's future...though I had hoped he'd have one as a Briton. Maybe a war that never was is over and no one really won or lost it, but I can't help feeling that Owein just lost his heritage."

Uryen was quiet, watchful; as if he were considering a petition.

"I know you can't understand how diminished I feel by everyone's renouncement of it," she continued undaunted. "I don't think you've ever been able to see what really affects me. Yet here I am trying, wanting to explain it to you one more time."

She ran a hand through her own copper hair then, pulling it back to gather it at the nape of her neck and then letting it go. "What you're about to do won't make anything easier for me. Lile? I never understood Lile's sanctioning of Arthur, nor why I never heard anything to the contrary after Merlin's bargain with the Christians became known. I suppose Merlin found a way to control her just like everyone else. As far as any concern I might have for my brother --Arthur's buried somewhere in Merlin's blackness where I can't reach him."

Uryen's expression remained angry, cold. She wished there was something else there. "And now there's you," she continued softly. "I understand that you are forced to submit. But I will never understand what made you decide to surrender. A public recanting...Uryen. I would never have thought you'd compromise your word. I always believed in your integrity."

His eyes flashed the bright black of hurt. "If you'd ever had a clear sight of me," he answered evenly, "you'd know I still had it."

There seemed nothing left to say after that. There was no ground they could stand on together. So she'd left to follow a sudden, overwhelming impulse.

From her hut, behind the jars and pots that held the knowledge of the goddesses, the strength of the moon, she withdrew Lile's blue-green sword. For two years she had kept it hidden from everyone, not knowing what she would do with it except protect it and be its keeper. Now, as though Modron herself guided her hand, Morgan carried it, still wrapped in the cloak she'd used in Caer Leon, out of Uryen's caer and across the heath.

She walked a league east of the caer to the wildwood that was untouched by foresters, and to the single Yew tree she knew grew there. Beneath its gnarled branches that reached in random attempts for the sun and the moon, she buried the sword. And from above, a shadow in the dark leaves cawed and cawed.

apart from well and cup   I sat   unquenched by holy
inspiration   no god-craft in my words   I felt   a
withered envoy   spewing out hollow phrases   to praise
imitation   till Cadoc's draught   the message of eternal
flowing spring   slaked doubt   such wine forgave my
father's sin   and fostered me   while on my tongue
I first tasted love

In the early autumn after the Battle of Badon, Taliesin was summoned south to Caer Leon. It seemed that Arthur wanted the most remarkable, the most unusual, and the most enviable things that Britain had to offer around him. The Saxon-looking bard, whose songs for Uryen confirmed his outstanding talent, and who had singularly managed to hold Arthur's attention all those moons ago on the eve of his sanctioning, fulfilled all three. Uryen, as Arthur's delegate, could say nothing against the appropriation, even though he had tempered his opinion of the bard during the course of the war and would sorely miss his talent. Morgan was in no way soothed by Taliesin's promise to see her whenever he could.

Taliesin's own opinion of his call to Caer Leon, however, was not easily apparent. He created a score of songs for Arthur in the first month, spent much of his time in the company of the young king, and yet seized the first opportunity leave. And Taliesin's first journey away from Caer Leon was not back to Rheged.

Despite the New Year's Feast of Samhain being only a few night's away, Arthur had readily granted Taliesin's request for a short leave. It was because Taliesin wanted to accept an invitation from the abbot Cadoc.

The short, bland-faced abbot himself greeted Taliesin at Llancarfan's gates and directed him through what at first appeared to be a typical British fortress. Within the fortifications there were several long buildings, which looked to be for storage or animals, and many round dwellings Cadoc called "cells."

"You all live alone," Taliesin commented hesitantly.

The abbot gave him a patient smile. "This is a community. A community of service to God. We are never truly alone."

"But you keep yourselves separate from normal life."

"We choose retreat from the world..." The abbot noticed the awkwardness in Taliesin's expression. "Ahhh, you mean women. Do not be embarrassed. That's often a source of curiosity."

They walked past more of the beehive shaped cells, all of them silent and inactive. "There are also Christian communities of women," the abbot explained," but we keep separate from one another and all society because we believe God deserves our absolute attention. The love we may find with another person distracts us from seeking God's greater love."

Taliesin stared at Cadoc intently. "Do you miss being with women?"

The boldness of his question startled the abbot for a moment, but he recovered saying, "No, my friend. God's love is tremendously satisfying. So much so that one desires nothing else." He patted the bard's back amiably. "I suppose you find that difficult to understand."

"No..." Taliesin looked away, his eyes distant and suddenly calm. "Not too difficult."

Though curiosity flickered in the abbot's eyes, he did not press further. Instead he continued the tour of the abbey, and took Taliesin past a small garden and a prominent stone hall.

It was not a hall, Cadoc corrected, but the church where they gathered to worship. Christians worshipped altogether and inside, not outside in secret glades and groves known only to the priesthood. Yet beside the church was a forest of stone, tall strangely etched pillars erected in rows on much trodden ground.

"The cemetery," Cadoc said softly and indicated that the bard could enter.

Taliesin walked hesitantly along the first row with the abbot beside him.

"This is how we bury our dead. We do not place the things of this life with them because we do not believe that they are passing into exactly the same kind of life in Annwn." The abbot's eyes were like warm, rich earth. "We believe that the Son of God will soon return and raise us all up, living and dead, to eternal life and make a heaven, a perfect world, here on earth."

Tracing his fingers along the rain and wind worn carvings in the stone, Taliesin asked, "And these?"

"Raised in memory of each of those whose resurrection we await."

"No," Taliesin turned to him but let his fingers linger. "I mean, these markings."

"A prayer."

Astonishment widened the bard's eyes and he turned back to the stone pillars. Reverently, though with an expression of disbelief, he traced the markings yet again and whispered, "A prayer? How can that be?"

Cadoc moved closer to him. "That is writing, Taliesin. You know of writing, don't you?"

Unabashed, the bard shook his head. The British language had no written form, and it had been over a century since the last Roman edict had been nailed to any wall.

"Each mark," the abbot explained amiably, "is a letter, a sound which when put altogether," he ran his finger along the top line, "makes up the word. This says blessed."

"Always?"

Puzzled, the abbot frowned a little and shook his head.

"I mean, permanently? This is the same word? Always? Where anyone who knows how to interpret the marks can know it?"

Cadoc smiled and nodded, clearly delighted by the bard's interest.

"In what tongue?" Taliesin had still not taken his eyes from the monument.

"Latin."

"The symbols of our tongue cannot be put on anything. They exist in the constant flow of life and so are always present but may never be contained."

"You know them by their tree names, though."

"The trees...yes." A shadow swept through Taliesin's clear blue eyes and was gone. He looked down at his host and explained in a flat voice, "Each sound may be related to a tree. But its not like this way of marking. The trees, the essence of each one is a way of charting the Great Circle, and speaking its magic."

"A magic you no longer feel." Without waiting for a response, gently, Cadoc took the bard's hand and retraced all that he had been fascinated with, translating, "Blessed is Gwion, who lives forever, in Christ."

Then the abbot let Taliesin's hand go only to guide him by the elbow. As they moved outside the cemetery, he said, "If words are what fascinate you, my friend, then I have something much more to show you."

Across the sun-dappled compound, past the bee-hive shaped, stone cells, to one of the long buildings, Cadoc silently led the bard. At the doorway he paused and beckoned with an eager smile.

"This is where we record the Word of God, Taliesin. Our *Scriptorium* ."

Upon entering, both men blinked against the sudden darkness until their eyes could adjust to the lamp-light. Along the wall on each side of the room, brown-robed men hunched over individual tables.

The monk whose shoulder they peered over seemed oblivious to their presence, so intense was his concentration. He was writing, but the glorious artistry that appeared on the scroll was an eternity from the crude stone etchings outside. The cold and regimented Roman markings were woven with joyous, interlacing ribbons of colour; and from the sides or the top or the bottom, those strange scratches gave birth to fierce animals and monster snakes, golden faces and perfect human forms.

Taliesin lifted his eyes from the work and whispered, "It's incredible!"

Cadoc nodded and, even though the monk still had not acknowledged them, patted the man on the shoulder in thanks.

"These are the words of God, Taliesin." His tone was hushed as he indicated all the codices on all the tables with a sweep of his hand. "Recorded and transmitted over and over. They're called the Gospels."

Holding up one finger to signal the bard to wait, the abbot went to a table at the front, retrieved a finished manuscript and brought it back for Taliesin to hold. With shaking hands, Taliesin traced the exquisite crafting while Cadoc translated. "*In the beginning was the Word ...and the Word was with God....* "

Abruptly, Taliesin thrust the scroll back at the abbot. "This is not news, Cadoc," he complained, sounding more disappointed than irritated. "The Art teaches that there are divine words. Words that hold absolute truth. But they are far above mortal ones and these," he jabbed in exaspiration at the manuscript in Cadoc's outstetched hands, "are still mortal ones. A translation, and so --"

"Fallible?" The abbot rested one hand on Taliesin's shoulder, "No." He slipped away to return the scroll and then escorted the bard back out into the sunlight.

Cadoc stopped just outside the door, absently surveying the compound in the quiet of late day. Life in the abbey was one of work, contemplation and prayer. Those not engaged in some indoor task were working the fields or alone in their small cells, and so the abbey could at times seem deserted. As it did now. They were alone, standing under the golden sun.

"You need not doubt those words, Taliesin," Cadoc continued, his voice full of gentle command. "God brought the Word to life, through Christ, making it both human and divine. Our empty human words are linked, through the Word made Flesh, to the divine. So, they can manifest divine wisdom - reveal Truth. Like the Gospels do."

The intensity on Taliesin's face was like the fire of desire.

"Poetry too," Cadoc continued. "The Art of Poetry can illustrate the mystery of the divine and show the way to Truth in ways no other human words can. You see," he held his hand out, open to the sunlight, as if the evidence were so simple, so obvious, it was drifting down all around them.

"You can equate knowledge to poetry, poetry to light, and light to truth."

Placing his hand again on the bard's shoulder, he added encouragingly, "Your Art can be a connection to the divine...for others...and for you."

Then the abbot removed a stone pendant from around his own neck. It was carved with the same swirling mark as decorated the sword Cadoc had given to Arthur at his sanctioning. He held the pendant out to Taliesin.

"Here it is: the magic you seek. Your Great Circle. The resurrection and the life. It's called *alpha-omega* , and it means the beginning and the end."

Bending his head, Taliesin allowed the abbot to place the pendant around his neck. And the two men stood clasped in embrace, the sun crowning their twin heads, light-haired and dark.

In the month of Dwarf Elder, on the New Year's Feast of Samhain, doorways between this world and Annwn open, letting a hush of scent, subtle and disturbing, waft through the night. It is the trace of spirits and gods roaming freely among humankind that is detectable, the essence of death and disorder, wonder and might. Anything can happen on that night, and the future can be seen in the death throes of any who succumb between dusk and dawn.

Into this night's celebration, a foul draft blew.

The boar's head, which Tegid had sacrificed to the spirits of the dead and thrust atop a pole to guard and sanctify the Feast, stared vigilantly out over the foggy heath while the crowd settled to their food. No one noticed as from beyond the dark edge of the heath a figure rose up like a piece of the fog itself and moved slowly towards them. No one looked up until, uninvited, the Vate Carnya hobbled into the firelight.

Flame shadows drew long talons across the old woman's craggy features as she turned to face the crowd. Her long white hair fell from a peak at her forehead to settle over her shoulders, and her eyes were slate and chill.

The crowd tightened together forgetting the feast, because Vates rarely sought the company of society and then only at the pull of the gods.

Morgan, who sat by her husband, seemed even more awed than her company and watched fixedly, one hand at her throat.

Carnya raised her bony arms to the swollen moon and cried out, "Evnyssen, the Troublemaker. Rhiannon, goddess of death. Cernunnos, the horned god who dwells under the earth. These all have ordered me to Caer Ysgrifennu to speak their warning." And from a large pouch tied to her waist, she pulled a live hare, holding it aloft. Since the animal's shape was the same as the dark image on the full moon, it was among the most sacred of creatures, blessed with entrails that held the future. Especially on this night.

In a swift arc, she sliced her knife lengthwise through the rabbit's underside and tossed the violently twitching animal to the ground. As Carnya watched it convulse in agony, she moaned herself as if the gods reached through her skin to tear at her insides. Then she fell to the ground and plunged her hands inside the still writhing animal to pull out the will of the gods.

Swaying, still moaning slightly, Carnya suddenly threw her head back and growled out a warning.

> "Blackened harvest blackest day the child of
> Arthur's sister will betray his blood for within
> his breath is both the King and Britain's death."

Then, just as abruptly she slumped forward and was still.

A murmur rose up like a cold wind through the crowd. Merlin had not been able to quell the news of Arthur's indiscretion with Margawse. Others at Badon had overheard Merlin's rage and come running to see what had happened. The story spread. And the people of Caer Ysgrifennu had heard it too, but typical of British attitude, no one had been prepared to judge the act before its consequences were known. Now, though, they hissed fearfully about what Carnya's prophecy could mean. It sounded as if a child would be born of Arthur's night with his sister, a child of destruction.

Morgan, alone, still studied the Vate. So she noticed that the old woman recovered far too quickly from her trance, and that, with the disinterest of someone who has completed a mundane task, she simply walked away.

Hazel

Tree of Wisdom

spell-bound by the truant snow's first fall Arthur
stared amazed that it should come at all to sully his
impeccant path and feared the laden clouds which
filled this curious day by dark the storm had
passed and Merlin roused him to reveal a prospect
pristine and enticing

The morning's ride south of Carlisle, along the spindly forest trail which mirrored the sinuous path of the river, took Morgan through desolate land. A softening of snow was still absent even though the air and the ground were brittle with cold. Skeletal oak tangled in spidery underbrush, mute despite the clawing north wind, stood etched against the low, ashen sky. Not a footprint, nor deer track, nor even the slight scratchings of a grouse existed in this forlorn place. Only the intermittent cry of the wind dared accompany her.

After a fortnight in Carlisle she had finally found the courage to take this journey.

They had returned to Carlisle just after Samhain to spend the winter there for the first time since the civil war. Peace meant it was safe again for the chieftain to leave his stronghold unguarded and claim his food tributes for the season in the traditional place.

This time though, the harsh, oppressive ghosts of Rome that Morgan had always sensed in every stone of that town, did not affect her. A present and far worse intolerance, which was growing around her, concerned her more; and that was the popular attitude towards Arthur's child.

News of the pregnancy had been confirmed by every trader who came to Caer Ysgrifennu and Carlisle, and apparently Carnya was not the only Vate to transmit the dire prophecy. Simultaneous warnings had been given out by Vates in four other *cantrefs* . And now there was a groundswell of opinion all over Britain that the child should be put to death as soon as it was born. Arthur was their shining new hero, the victor at Badon and saviour of Gododdin, the promised one who would lead a re-united Britain to glory. The threat to him, and thus to Britain, must be circumvented.

Morgan did not believe that Arthur was the hero of anything except by skill of Merlin's machinations. And she did not believe that Arthur's child was *necessarily* bound to be his nemesis. The proof of that centred on Carnya's prophecy and the question of its truth.

Morgan did believe that prophecy came directly from the gods and therefore its words were truth, though the past few years had taught her to doubt its interpretation. And now, for the first time, she was also considering the possibilty that a prophecy may be entirely fabricated, not just misused. It was exactly what Nimue had suggested to her so long ago; that expediency could stand in the place of a Vate's gift. The thought made her feel ill because of the taint it left on all practitioners of the Great Arts, but then she had learned about hypocrisy during the past years too.

Her doubts about this prophecy became grave when she learned from Accolon that Arthur was expecting an envoy from the Pope. Uryen had not told her because he knew that she had not wavered in her stance against the Christian alliance and, he said, he had not wanted to give the impetus for any new campaign. Accolon, though, had become her confidant since Taliesin left, and as easily confided in her. He explained that the Christians were horrified by what Arthur had done; they called it a great sin.

A sin, as Morgan understood it, was something which separated you from the gods; because of it you were lost to them. It was a concept that puzzled Morgan greatly. How could you ever be separated from the gods when they had made you and the world from their essence, infused everything you saw and tasted and touched and dreamt, their power evident in every tree and stream, sun and moonrise?

Regardless, the Christians were condemning Arthur and the long awaited acknowledgment of Arthur's rule from Rome was in jeopardy. No Christian, Accolon said, would stand behind a King or a nation that condoned incest, as they called it. Without the Pope's sanction, Britain's new allies, the Gauls and the Franks would withdraw their support.

Morgan had thought long about the prophecy then. Merlin could not undo what Arthur had done. So he had to find a way to keep Arthur in power and mollify his Christian supporters. He might be able to persuade the Christians that Arthur truly had been unaware and was now repentant, but he could not let a child exist as permanent evidence of the sin. The prophecy then, Morgan had decided, was Merlin's way to make Britons judge Arthur and Margawse's error before time could reveal its actual consequence. Briton's gods had agreed with the Christian one: the outcome would be evil.

There was at least one source where, Morgan knew, she could discover whether or not Carnya's prophecy were true. It was for that she needed to raise her courage to challenge her own long held beliefs about prophecy, and, if her suspicions proved correct, the courage to take yet another even stronger stand against Merlin, Arthur and this time the brunt of common conviction. Because she would not tolerate the needless death of this child.

And so she journeyed to Ceridwen, to consult with that notoriously gifted and tortured Vate. No one would have thought to buy Ceridwen's tongue. She was supposed to be so maddened by the touch of the gods that few ever even considered obtaining her council. Besides that, there were many tales of the horrible spirits that issued from her *sidh*, an ancient mound of earth which led to the Otherworld and under which she was said to live. Even so, Morgan went to her now willingly, less afraid of the taint of madness or haunts than of other taints.

Morgan let her horse pick its own way along the frozen path and peered instead into the grey, gaunt oak trees ahead for any sign of a clearing or a fire. It was hopeless. Everything in front of her was the same as behind. Her heart fluttered with the realization that she no longer had any sense of direction. It was a foolish fear, she immediately told herself. She had not turned around, and she was following the river - it didn't flow in a circle. But the disquieting sensation stayed with her. She wished she had asked Accolon to accompany her.

The silence was disturbing too. The forest was unbelievably desolate and still, more like a vision than anything real.

She decided to pay attention to her growing hunger. Two bags strapped to her horse were full of provisions: corn meal, bread, bacon, salt, cheese, bees wax and even a few skins of mead - all for Ceridwen. She had not thought to bring much for herself and wondered now if she had not brought too much for the Vate. Surely she had, of bread and cheese anyway.

A raven screeched overhead. Morgan jumped, dropping the food she had retrieved, and agitatedly looked around. It was a raven that called out, she was sure. She pulled the hood of her cloak up over her head and shivered. "And what do you think, eh?" she leaned forward to pat her horse and whisper in its flicking ear. "Did you hear a bird?" But there was no sign of any bird.

Suddenly, her horse reared up and Morgan dug her fingers into its mane to hold on. Trying to rein it in, she saw what had startled it. Right in front of them, as if it had just sprung out of the lifeless earth, was a bramble- covered rise of land in the middle of a small clearing. Around it, oak and hazel, like dark giants, stood silently protective.

Black mushrooms of smoke from a fire on the other side of it filled the air with the pungent scent of herbs burned to summon the gods. Morgan felt them catch at the back of her throat as she dismounted. Perhaps, she thought, the Vate was consulting for someone else. But there was no other horse, still no sign of any life. She waited, holding the reins, for her conviction to return.

Another screech, long and loud, raised the hair on the back of her neck. It was not from any raven this time.

From over the top of the mound, a filthy bundle of skins and matted hair hurled itself towards her. Still shrieking, the creature railed at Morgan, hitting her on the arms and chest. Not knowing whether to run or try and contain her maniacal attacker, who was a good head shorter than she, Morgan ended up simply trying to ward off the blows. As they struggled, Morgan's hood slipped off and suddenly the howling stopped from behind the wretched tangle of hair and dirt. Then the head tilted as if it could see through the filthy curtain. Hesitantly, Morgan relaxed her stance.

Doing something between a shuffle and a skip, the creature started to circle her chanting nonsense sounds. Morgan turned this way and that, trying to keep her eye on what it might be doing. Finally it stopped, in front of her once more, and poked a crusted hand at her hair. She restrained the urge to slap the hand away. The fingers dawdled amongst the thick copper curls. The fingers dawdled and Morgan's nerves stretched tight.

Abruptly the hand withdrew and the creature parted its own tangle of hair to reveal the left half of a fragile face. It was the face of a woman, still young for the dirt clung smoothly to creaseless skin. And the eye, large, bright, the colour of an acorn, was intelligent far beyond the savagery of that wail.

Morgan found her voice. "I'm looking for the Vate, Ceridwen."

The woman pushed the rest of her hair back off her face. "Where be from?" she asked in a voice that was high and sweet.

The voice startled Morgan even more than the face. Could this be Ceridwen, she wondered? It must be, but she had never imagined the Vate would be so --

"*Where* be from?" This time it was a demand.

"From Carlisle. I am Morgan."

"Oooh, oooh!" The woman's eyes grew round and she did a little dance. "I know. I know. You be late." She wagged a finger close to Morgan's face. "I wait for you. You be late."

Suddenly frightened, Morgan took a step back. How could she have known Morgan was coming?

Her reaction did not matter because Ceridwen -- Morgan was certain now that this was the Vate -- instantly lost interest in Morgan when she spied the packs on the horse. She darted over to the animal and started to tug at them.

"For me. For me."

Morgan went over and loosened the bags. Grabbing them and holding them close to her body, Ceridwen scurried back over the mound the way she had come.

Morgan hesitated a moment, unsure whether or not this pathetic creature could give her any answers, and then, because there was no place else to go for them, decided to follow.

Around the other side there was a low entrance to the mound, through which Ceridwen must have gone. Morgan looked at the low burning, well-tended fire nearby, took a deep breath, and ducked through the entrance herself.

Astonishingly, inside was as cozy as any house - warm, lighted by two lamps, filled with comfortable furs, and scented with sprigs of dried flowers stuck into the dirt walls. Ceridwen seemed to be unaware of Morgan's presence and was occupied digging in a sack. Morgan found that she could stand upright by moving a little further into the dwelling. Once she could, she stood quietly, watching.

After tossing out a spindle whorl, the pelt of a small animal, a broken comb, a shard of pottery, the skull of perhaps a bird, and several pieces of cloth, the woman finally found what she wanted. She stood to strip off the skins she wore and, for a moment, her naked body shimmered in the lamplight. She was young, very young, with breasts that were high and rounded and hips sleek with the lack of child bearing. So young, Morgan thought, to be so wretched.

The woman pulled the new garment over her head and turned, transformed by the scarlet robe into the eerie, magical figure of the Vate.

Ceridwen came forward to kneel in the very centre of the mound. Parting the furs on the ground, she drew a circle in the dirt beneath them.

"This is the answer to your question, Morgan of Rheged," she said in a voice transformed as well. Pointing to what she had drawn, she insisted, "The answer to all your questions. But to understand it requires a sacrifice. What are you willing to sacrifice?"

Everything and nothing came to Morgan's mind. She did not know what the Vate was talking about. She did not understand.

"You will have to sacrifice something, Morgan. Something must be given in order to receive. Loss and Gain. Endings and Beginnings" With that, the Vate closed her eyes and opened her hands, palms up, on her lap.

Morgan felt a shaking well up inside her and wrapped her arms around herself tightly.

Ceridwen's breathing was slow and soft.

Something flickered on the wall just out of Morgan's direct line of sight. She took her eyes off the Vate to look and sank in shock to her knees.

What she saw was the shadow of the Vate cast by the lamplight, only it wasn't an outline of a woman. It was the head of a raven.

Morgan   My child

Modron! Morgan felt all the breath in her body rise to her throat. Modron was speaking to her again. But the Vate's mouth was tightly closed!

Listen Morgan   Do not fear   Listen
Arthur's end will come   as all ends
come   Britain's end will come   as
all ends come   No one can hasten or
prevent the waning of the moon   nor
after   its waxing

Modron's words were stones that skipped across water: briefly they flashed, solidly, on the surface of Morgan's understanding, their weight defying the nature of their path, until suddenly they disappeared.

From the instant of their loss, to the squinting sharpness of the daylight air, on through the tendrils of fog which curled around her night, Morgan concentrated to remember how those moments of enlightenment, how the touch of those words, felt.

The setting sun scattered bronze light on a leg or an arm or the profile of a bearded face. Morgan stood in the open doorway of the house used by the unmarried members of Uryen's teulu and scanned the group of men readying themselves for the evening meal with their chieftain.

Almost immediately Accolon, who had been fastening his shoes, rose to greet her. "Lady," he said with surprise.

The others glanced at one another significantly and then continued with what they had been doing. Suddenly, Morgan was embarrassed. Trying to sound casual and aloof she said, "Could I speak with you for a moment, Accolon?"

"Certainly, Lady. Certainly." He stumbled a little in his rush to get out the door and follow her. Behind him a burst of laughter filled the house.

They both pretended to ignore the men's reaction and walked along the roughly cobbled road with deliberate calmness for a while.

Morgan intended to lead him away from the occupied section of Carlisle, perhaps to walk through the crumbling forum or up the road to the north wall. But the weight of what she wanted to tell him was overwhelming and she wished they could be somewhere absolutely alone. Stopping, she gazed around her and then looked up at him. "Is there some place you can think of where we can go to be alone?" She caught the flash of anticipation in his eyes and inwardly winced. "To talk," she added hurriedly.

As close as they'd become, and as much gossip as that had generated, Morgan had persisted in keeping things between them at simple friendship. She was not sure why. Maybe she really did not want anything more from the company of a man. Or maybe she was frightened of trusting in something that might not really be there. Sometimes, when she caught the way Accolon looked at her, she found herself remembering the way she used to look at Taliesin. And then, because she was now in his position, she could almost understand how Taliesin must have felt: his emptiness, and his fear.

Accolon led them to the stables, found an empty stall with clean straw and with a shrug that tried too hard to be casual said, "Only four-legged eavesdroppers in here."

"Good. Because I have something very important to tell you." Morgan went in past him and sat down on the straw.

"You saw her, didn't you?" He joined her, but not too closely, on the floor. The fading sun still streamed in through the main doors and it draped one corner of the stall in red-gold light.

Morgan nodded, not knowing now how to begin. How could she explain what had happened?

He regarded her kindly. "Ceridwen?" he urged.

At his encouraging smile, on their own, the words tumbled from her. "The gods really do talk through her. I mean, really through her, not to her. She doesn't use bones, or animals, or smoke or anything to divine their message. I'm not even sure she's aware of what's happening to her. She just sits there with her mouth closed and - - Accolon, I heard Modron's voice."

He stopped her. "Another voice?"

Folding her hands in her lap, Morgan took a deep breath and answered. "Yes. Ceridwen didn't translate what she heard, didn't say one word. It was Modron who spoke to me." She waited for him to dispute it.

"Modron." He pursed his lips in thought. "Are you sure?"

She knew it. She could not share this with anyone. Even he did not believe her. Loneliness wrapped its familiar cold cloak around her. "Yes, I'm sure," she answered sharply.

"No," he took her hand. "I mean, that it was Modron and not another deity."

Still suspicious, she watched him silently, but she did not pull her hand away.

"I know your devotion to your Art...and your honesty." His eyes were earnest and warm. "If you say you had such a profound experience, well, I can think of no one the gods would choose over you."

"And I apologize." Now he covered her hand with both of his and edged a little closer to her. His breath was sweet and warm. "Of course you would know it was Modron. She's your patron. I may find such things remarkable...but then I'm an unremarkable man." He shrugged. "The gods don't bother with me. Still, as much as these things amaze me, I don't dispute them. And I don't dispute you," he added squeezing her hand tightly. "You know that."

She did know, she reprimanded herself. Accolon shared more of her beliefs than even Taliesin had, before the bard's interest in the Christians. And he certainly seemed to hear and consider her thoughts far better than Uryen ever had. He was a man full of strength and resolve and wonder. And right now she felt foolish for doubting him.

"It's just that..." she struggled to explain, "this is so extraordinary, and so important." She hesitated. "And so dangerous."

His mouth twitched slightly as he tried to hide his irritation. He need not have bothered to spare her. She had realized as soon as she had said it how idiotic it was to warn a warrior of his status about danger. But she meant the one kind of danger he'd never encountered - - to his position and his honour.

Her last thought was like falling through the ice on a pond. Suddenly she was drenched in the cold fact of what she was about to do, and what she was going to ask of him.

"There's no real prophecy about Arthur's child." He didn't ask her anything. He just said it, as if he had fallen through the ice too.

"So, what are you planning?"

"I'm going to save the child's life."

All he did was nod calmly, knowingly. She knew she could dare to ask. "I need you to do something."

"Anything," he responded quickly.

"Look, I don't want you to compromise --"

"Just tell me what do you want me to do," he interjected.

"Accolon...I can't predict how my action will be interpreted."

He held up his hand to stop her. "Yes you can. And so can I. Morgan..." He said her name so softly it was almost a sigh. "If you believe that what you are about to do is right, then so do I. I'm with you."

He kissed her then, and the spirit of it surprised her. It was the kiss of equals, passionate but with no lust for power; it asked her to give while offering up all she needed. And she drew herself close up into him, feeling both safe and powerful in the embrace, revelling in the uniqueness.

When they were making love he looked straight at her, opening himself to her need, taking his excitement from it. Then he moved so that she could be on top of him, and she bent forward, slipping her arms behind his neck, to feel his breath against her cheek, to steady herself against the astonishing rush of pleasure.

Later they lay together in the darkness, the sunlight having long retreated, and felt for straw in each other's hair, and -- despite tomorrow -- laughed.

at her wheel Modron spun   thread of copper hair   each
spindle turn unwinding   darker strands   until the
goddess drew   filaments of blood   and Lile awoke
knowing it was time   to mend the silence between
Morgan   and herself   no longer did the separation allow
Lile time to tear apart Merlin's web   from within
while preserving Morgan's delicate fate   Merlin had
secured his prize   so now Morgan's protest   could be
woven with Lile's   and must be soon   before the warp of
Morgan's anger   crossed the woof of Merlin's will   and
Morgan chose to battle   alone   the new deceit   for
such a pattern   the goddess had decreed   was entwined

It took two months of careful, unobtrusive arrangements before Morgan and Accolon could implement Morgan's plan. They shared a nature that was unwilling to risk failure through impulsiveness, and by being so methodical they avoided any suspicious questions from others. Of course everyone in Carlisle knew about their involvement with one another, and no one assumed that all the time they spent together was for anything but pleasure.

Most of the time, that was true. But Accolon was also occupied with finding and arranging a safe hiding place for Margawse's child. It was not easy. All of Britain, it seemed, feared the prophecy and thus the child. And it could not become known that Accolon was making strange inquiries about fostering a child he did not have.

He finally found some distant kin on an island off the shores of Strathclyde that would, in exchange for a yearly gift of a cow or a pig, take in Accolon's motherless bastard.

The payment was a problem for Morgan, since the circumstances of her mother's marriage had left her with no wealth of her own. Accolon offered to pay it himself, but Morgan refused. Her solution was to start accepting goods for the services of her Art and trade them later for the necessary livestock.

Then they had to devise a way to get the child there. Morgan had from the start said that she would travel to Gododdin to be with Margawse and from there to Strathclyde with the child, but Accolon refused to agree to her travelling alone. They fought over it because Morgan thought he did not believe her capable. She should have realized that he was first a warrior, trained to judge exactly how much risk to take. And she probably should also have been able to see that he was only too aware, perhaps too in awe, of her strength to dispute it. But Morgan had never had anyone in love with her before.

Morgan also said that she did not want him taking any more risks. If he were to travel with her, and she were caught, his involvement in the child's rescue would be irrefutable. By staying behind and then leaving Caer Ysgrifennu much later, no one would link their two journeys, or their purposes, and he could safely meet with her in a pre-arranged place and take the child from there. That way, even if Morgan were later found out, the baby's location would remain a mystery. Accolon conceded only after he realized it was the safest plan for the child.

For Accolon, an absence from Carlisle was easy to arrange. Winter meant Uryen's teulu was relatively idle, in council mostly for administrative tasks, and so Accolon's presence was not urgently required. For Morgan, a long absence was more difficult.

However, she had found a solution to that too, and had begun to ease the way by speaking to Uryen off and on about her desire to go to Avalon and be properly sanctioned. A fortnight before she was planning to leave for Gododdin, she told him that she had received permission from Lile to go.

Uryen did not seem to take much interest, did not ask how she had managed to repair things with Lile. It must have been sufficient for him that the war's end also resolved Morgan and Lile's differences. Anyway, nothing really seemed to hold his interest anymore.

So on a sharp white, winter day in Rowan, Morgan finally packed her horse. It had been nine moons since the Battle of Badon; Margawse's baby would be born by the end of the next. The journey to Caer Eidyn could easily take a fortnight, and Morgan barely concealed her agitation to begin. Accolon was much calmer, routinely checking her horse and supplies, as if she really were simply going to Avalon. Then they stood for a long time in each other's arms, the air around them brittle blue with sun and cold. They would not have the warmth of each other again for a long time, much longer than they expected.

By the third day, Morgan's confidence in her ability to make this journey alone had almost disappeared. She had been unprepared for the enormity of the isolation on the long, treacherous trail north, much less the palpable danger. Homesteads were non-existent within the dense pine forest, which broke open only at the edge of jagged peaks or fog-shrouded bogs. So each night she set up her camp alone and stayed awake long past moonset, watching. From the border of blackness beyond her fire, wolves and wildcats watched too, their eyes glinting red. She tried not to dwell on the knowledge that there was no one to help her.

Yet she knew she could not let these fears deter her, and tried to concentrate instead on the danger Margawse's child would soon face. After a seven-night, she took to throwing rocks at the predators outside her firelight, angry that they dared to threaten her success.

The isolation proved to be more formidable. She tried imagining conversations with Accolon, or making love. She talked to herself, to her horse, and even to the endless pinetrees. Imagining Owein, made it worse; she missed him more than anything else.

Her journey took more than a fortnight, yet she still had to stop for one more night to ready herself. May Modron keep the child in the womb, she prayed as she mixed a powder of ground roots with a small amount of melted snow. Then she smeared the dark, noxious paste through her hair and waited for a while by her fire. The old clothes she had brought along were piled and ready by her bedroll. Tomorrow a plump, brown-haired bondswoman would arrive at Gododdin's Caer.

Enhinti was taking particular care in braiding her hair, admiring its luster in Morgan's mirror. Uryen had left early that morning to break a horse he had recently acquired. He had left in better spirits than he had enjoyed in months, probably because of the task at hand. Enhinti, though, would have unquestioningly assumed it was because of her.

A servant interrupted her.

"There's a messenger here looking for Lady Morgan," the man said abruptly. "Where's the chieftain?"

Enhinti stared at the man for a moment and then said casually, "Oh, don't bother him with this. Just send the man in to me and I'll deal with it."

"But -"

"I'll explain to the man where Lady Morgan is," she continued in reassuring tones over his objection, "and see what he wants to do. Just go and get him." She waved the servant away.

When the messenger was brought in, Enhinti was finished dressing and standing regally wrapped in Morgan's fur vest. She dismissed the servant with authority. Once she and the messenger were alone, she addressed him sharply, "You have something to tell me?"

Tall and sinewy, the man regarded her curiously. "Are you Morgan of Rheged?"

Enhinti lifted her chin slightly. "Yes," she said without blinking.

The room, her dress and manner must have convinced him. Besides, he would not be fed or paid until he delivered the words.

"I have word for you from Lile, Lady of the Lake, Mistress of..."

"Yes, yes," Enhinti, wide-eyed, urged him impatiently, "I know. Just tell me."

Lile's impulse to send word that she would like to see Morgan could not have had worse timing. She must have thought that it was finally safe now that her forced political position -- for what else but force could have made a woman of Lile's conviction bend to Merlin's will -- no longer compromised Morgan's, and there was no more talk of Morgan's overt defiance. The message spoke of Lile's enduring affection for Morgan, and Morgan's enduring antagonism against Arthur's rule. No astuteness was necessary for Enhinti to discern Morgan's true destination.

Posing as a seamstress seeking the patronage of the chieftain's wife, Morgan discovered that Margawse had been sent off by her husband to live alone in a small hut at the far northern corner of the Caer. The Caer was no bigger than most, but to Morgan, fattened by bundles of rags stuffed in her clothes and tied to her hips, it seemed she'd gone a great distance along the slippery path.

When she reached the house, rubbing her nose from the cold, Morgan halted, fearing this next moment, listening to the small voice inside her.

Her sister. The one who had disappeared at Merlin's bidding seventeen years ago. What would Margawse look like at twenty-nine harvests? Morgan couldn't remember what she'd looked like at twelve. And what kind of woman was she? Like their mother? Frail and beautiful and crippled by only being able to see herself when she was reflected in a man's eyes? What if she saw her mother standing there inside that hut?

And a larger voice inside her answered: It's the child you've come for. Taking a deep breath, she called out.

In answer, a small, drawn face peeked out from behind the hide over the doorway. The woman had dark crescents under her eyes and her lank hair needed combing. Still, her beauty was not erased, rather it was made excruciatingly so by the haunt of sorrow that emphasized high cheekbones and full dark lips.

"What?" she asked in a sigh.

"I'm...I'm a seamstress, My Lady and I've come to see if you -- "

Margawse pulled the hide back a little and studied Morgan more closely. "I make my own."

"But," Morgan took a step closer, "I do excellent work and if you'd just take a look at it."

"Leave me alone." With that, Margawse abruptly disappeared.

Mustering her determination, Morgan looked around to see if anyone were watching and then boldly entered the hut.

Margawse barely looked up, continuing in her awkward attempt to reseat herself by the fire. "I told you to go away."

Morgan wanted to go over and help her down. The pregnancy looked enormous on her thin frame. But she didn't want to raise any alarm in the woman.

"Margawse," she began softly, "I've come to help you."

Bright, bird-like in their dark sockets, Margawse's eyes darted with alarm. "Who are you?"

Morgan dared another step closer. "I'm Morgan. Your sister."

Margawse shook her head in refusal and disbelief.

"Yes. This..." Morgan patted her lumpy clothes, "is all a disguise. Some of your husband's teulu were at Arthur's sanctioning. I thought they might recognize me."

There was nothing except bitter, faint amusement on Margawse's face. I know, Morgan said to herself. Easy to say.

If I were you, I'd want proof too.

"Remember the horse game, Margawse. And my raven?"

Her eyes opened wide for a moment, like a flower seeking sun.

"Who else would come to help you now?"

Abruptly, the flower was gone. "I don't need any help."

Why she'd closed up bewildered Morgan. Didn't she understand what was going on? Morgan knelt down beside her and grasped her hand. "Margawse, they're planning to kill your child as soon as it's born. I've come to save it. You do want that, don't you? Tell me you don't want the child dead too." Before this moment, Morgan had refused to consider the possibility that Margawse might hate the child in her. Now, faced with Margawse's desolation, the thought chilled her.

Ignoring Morgan's hand, Margawse turned flat eyes to the fire and spoke in a hollow, single tone.

"I have four living children by a man who has never held my hand, kissed me on the mouth, or even called me by my name. There was a fifth child. Stillborn. I held it to my breast all through the night anyway. No one could make me let go of it."

Life, though brutalized by pain, came back to her eyes. She turned to Morgan. "They're my only joy, my children."

Tears sliding down her cheeks, Morgan drew Margawse into her arms and whispered, "Let me help you."

Fresh snow under a full moon illuminated the forest as if it were day. It remained a colourless landscape, though, with all evidence of life black and indistinct against a dormant, white plane.

Merlin slipped silently from his horse, tethered it to a withered trunk, and walked the remaining distance to the clearing. The man he had arranged to meet was already there.

Merlin greeted the man without warmth and immediately outlined his desires. "It appears that we can no longer leave the matter of the child to the good sense of the people of Gododdin. I have just received news that there may be a plan to save it."

Merlin's hireling, an ill-kempt man with the black, empty eyes of a beetle, showed no reaction.

"I want you to find two or three other men to go with you to Gododdin and make sure that doesn't happen. If there is a plan, look for a woman to be at the centre of it." Merlin looked away thoughtfully. "A woman no one knows...who has just arrived in the Caer or the village."

"And if we find her?" The man bit at his thumb nail.

"You must make sure the child dies." Merlin's words crystalized into cold puffs of air. "Do not let her stop you."

Morgan returned to the hut with the water Margawse could certainly no longer haul. No one in the caer, it seemed, felt generous enough towards Margawse to tend to her needs; and Lot did not require them to. She was a woman in exile amongst her own countrymen, yet haunted by their constant scrutiny. A guard for her was unnecessary: everyone watched for the child.

If it were not for a midwife named Esselt from the village, Morgan's sudden presence would have caused dangerous speculation. Esselt had delivered all five of Margawse's other children and she alone persisted in tending to Margawse in her usual way. For reasons that were a mystery to both Morgan and Margawse, Esselt wanted no explanation for Morgan when she met her, saying simply, "I don't care who you are. She needs you." On her own initiative, she told people that Morgan was a kinswoman whom she had arranged to have come and see to Margawse in these latter days. Margawse, she explained, was not well and needed constant attention, which she herself was too busy to provide.

Thank the gods for their strange servants, Morgan thought, as she saw the broad form of Esselt coming down the lane.

"And how is My Lady this morning?" Esselt asked, brushing past Morgan to fuss over Margawse, who was lying on her bed and rubbing her stomach.

Margawse glanced worriedly at Morgan. "It's started." A shiver, half thrill, half fear, ran through Morgan.

Esselt nodded, taking Margawse's hand. "Be calm, now. You know what to do." She called to Morgan over her shoulder. "Get the pile of cloths from the trunk."

Hurrying, though she was not sure why, Morgan brought the soft wool pieces to the midwife. And forgot what she was doing when she saw the grimance of pain on Margawse.

"There's something you should know," Esselt said calmly, taking the cloths from Morgan. As she helped Margawse to move so that she could smooth the cloths under and around her, she continued, "Last night, in the village, three men were asking about you. They were looking for any stranger...a woman...who might have arrived recently."

Fearfully, Margawse grabbed Morgan's hand. The look of despair on her sister's face dispelled any calm Morgan might have been able to maintain. Turning quickly to Esselt, feeling her own stomach twist, Morgan asked, "Who are they? Where are they from?" Inside she already knew the answers, though she could not begin to guess how Merlin found out.

Esselt shook her head, shrugged, and turned her attention to Margawse as another pain came.

When it eased, Margawse was the first to speak. She turned her hollow eyes back to Morgan. "It's hopeless," she sighed. "Someone's discovered what we've planned. We'll never get the baby to safety now."

Horrified at her disclosure, Morgan was speechless. She merely stared at her sister, wondering what she could say to undo it.

Esselt's large, warm hand closed over hers. "I know. Why else would you appear out of nowhere?" She did not smile, but her eyes were reassuring. "Now others will come to that conclusion. The only luck we have is that the child may come before they do." She turned back once more to Margawse and laid her ear against the woman's stomach.

"We?"

"Shhh."

A tear slid down Margawse's cheek and Morgan ached with her sister's fear as well as her own. "What do you mean, we?"

Sitting back on her heels, looking from one to the other, Esselt said as simply as if she were giving her name, "I have devoted my life to bringing children safely into the world. A child is a child. Nothing more. Nothing less."

Another moment of looking into those calm eyes, and Morgan made the leap: she would trust her. Rising to pace around the small room, Morgan rubbed her forehead, trying to think of a new plan. Suddenly relief seized her.

"All right, then." She faced the other two women squarely. "This is what we have to do now. If there are men waiting for a strange woman with a newborn to try and leave the caer...we'll have to let them find one."

By evening, Margawse's labour had progressed no further. Esselt had left much earlier to give the impression that her visit this morning was simply another check, and promised she would be back after sundown. She had been confident that hard labour would not begin before then; however, Morgan was sure Esselt expected Margawse to be doing much better than she was. Morgan moved back from the doorway where she had been watching for the midwife and went to sit beside her sister. She looked so frail, so tired.

"Morgan," her hand lingered on Morgan's arm. "Tell me more about Avalon." Her lashes fluttered, eyes closed. "Tell me more."

Morgan dampened a cloth to wipe her sister's forehead and cheeks. And let her sleep.

"How is she?" Esselt touched Morgan's shoulder to rouse her from her nap.

"Oh. You're here. Good. I don't know how she's doing. I'm worried it's taking too long."

"No," Margawse raised herself up on one elbow. "It's now."

As the night deepened, Morgan kept her sister in her arms, lifting her when she needed to squat and push, cradling her when she needed to rest, until it seemed the rhythm of the labour were her own. At midnight, Margawse delivered a glistening, strong boy, and eased herself back to rest against Morgan's breast, holding her child to her own breast to muffle his first cries.

Morgan reached around to touch the tiny, damp head, and felt all trace of fear leave her. She would succeed. She would save this fine life.

"We shouldn't wait too long," Esselt cautioned. "It would be better if we left well before dawn." She held out her arms for the boy.

Touching her lips to her child's head, Margawse whispered, "You are Mordred." Then, without hesitation, she lifted the child up for Esselt to take. "His name is Mordred," she said plainly as the woman gathered him into her own arms. "Tell them that."

Esselt gently smiled in assent. Then she carefully bound Mordred next to her ample breasts, pulled her cloak around them both, and looked in anticipation at Morgan.

After making sure her sister was comfortable, Morgan rose to ready herself. She changed quickly and, picking up the baby-shaped bundle of rags that she would carry, bent to kiss her sister. "Are you sure you will be all right here? They won't all turn on you, with the baby gone? I know we've talked about this --"

"Yes, yes." Margawse touched Morgan's cheek. "With the baby gone..." hurt flashed in her eyes, "I'll be fine. Lot will give me a divorce, I'll get my property back and I'll be able to leave."

Morgan sighed, not convinced.

"You have to go." She wrapped her arms around Morgan's neck and hugged her tightly. "I'll miss you, Morgan. Very much."

Tears came, but Morgan tried to smile past them. "Out of this trouble, the goddess has given me a great gift. You."

She knew she could not let herself linger. She had to leave first. She was the lure. Yet at the door she turned back to Margawse one more time.

"May the goddess be with you," Margawse said, her eyes brighter than Morgan had ever seen them.

"And with you," Morgan whispered, slipping out into the dark.

The moon had set and thick night swirled around the buildings of the caer. For Esselt and Mordred's sake, the darkness was a gift, but Morgan hoped it would not make it too difficult to follow her. Giddiness threatened at the thought of deliberately eliciting such murderous attention. It was better than crippling fear, she decided.

She moved quickly towards the main gate. Everyone seemed to be in their beds; the laneways deserted. But if the men were here in Caer Eidyn, and not still down in the village, they would be somewhere nearby, awake and watching.

There. Behind her. She thought she saw a shadow slip from one pocket of gloom to another between the buildings. But no sound accompanied it.

She drew a deep breath. It was going to be a long walk down to the village where her horse was.

At the main gate she looked around, cautiously, once more. Nothing. And by the time she was on the trail leading down from the caer, she was distressingly sure that she had left unnoticed. The trail was slippery because of the early spring thaw, and Morgan's progress was slow and treacherous. Esselt, on horseback, would probably pass her, she worried. What would happen then, if no one had noticed Morgan's departure first? Fervently she prayed to Modron that the men were in the village.

It was too dark to see very far up or down the trail now; Morgan could not have seen the most brazen pursuer. Still, there was no sound except the sloshing of her own shoes in the mud. Where was Esselt?

Another turn in the trail and suddenly there seemed to be more shadow behind her than in front, a denser blackness that gathered form and speed.

She hurried despite the tricky trail.

On the last turn, before the path eased into rolling farmland, Morgan heard the distinct sound of a knife being slowly drawn from its sheath.

And she ran, ran without thought across the fields to huddle of buildings still discernible under the starlit sky.

She did not look behind her, did not want to know how close her pursuers were, did not think of anything she could do other than run.

The first bondsman's hut was close enough now for her to yell out. Then she realized: calling for help would only let them know she *didn't* have Mordred. She was supposed to be secretly rescuing the child from a whole countryside that wanted his death. How could she yell for someone to help her?

Panting. Now she could hear their laboured breath, they were so close. It was impossible to outrun them, but she had to at least get them as far away from Esselt and the boy as she could - with a brutal slam she hit the ground face down, all her breath leaving in a sharp pain. The man who had landed on her quickly rolled off and yanked her over onto her back. She could not speak, could not breathe.

Two others stood over her as the first man ripped away the bundle she had tied to her chest and slit it open with a knife. The shock at finding only rags made him stop for an instant.

Morgan scrambled to get up and run again, but she was not fast enough. The man knocked her back to the ground with a fist across her face.

"Where is it?" he snarled, standing over her.

One of the other men bent over her to press a knife at her throat. "Answer him."

Morgan swallowed and tasted blood at the back of her throat. She also felt a thin trail running out of her nose and over her lips. Looking directly at her questioner, she answered, "Safe."

He pressed the cold edge harder against her neck. "Where!"

Peering into the dark, Morgan was desperate for any sign of Esselt. They must not see her. She had to think of what to do. The third man, who had been watching her, glanced hesitantly over his shoulder in the direction Morgan was looking.

The knife bit. "In the village," Morgan gasped.

"Can't be," the one who held her challenged. "You were coming from the caer. It's got to be back there." The others started to grumble in assent.

Morgan struggled to keep her tone even. "No. We got the child out of the caer this morning. I left now to fool--"

The man jerked her by the hair and put the point of the knife just under her chin. "You're lying. No one left with any child."

"Wait." The third man pushed in between Morgan and her captor. "The midwife."

"But she went back."

"So? It was another ruse. By all the gods, we're dead if that child got past us." He shoved the other two away from Morgan. "Leave her and move . Maybe we've still time." And suddenly they were gone, running towards the village.

Morgan lay back in the grass and breathed through her mouth. Relief spilled over her like cold air. Though why they had not slit her throat anyway, she could not guess. She wiped at her nose and swallowed. It was still left for her to get past them, to her horse, and make her escape before they came looking for her again. But it would take a while for them to discover the child was not in the village. And Esselt, who would turn off just before the village to take the road south, would be well on her way to Accolon by then.

Wincing, she stood shakily and started to go the long way around the field in order to approach the village from the other side. By the time she was half-way around she could hear the roars and shouts. Though her body ached, she ran the rest of the way and reached the south end of the village in time to see a mob slithering together in the middle of the street. One of her attackers was leading them on, screaming that The Curse was loose, that enemies were hiding the child so it could grow to destroy Britain.

"Find it!" the man demanded. "Don't let Gododdin be remembered as the downfall of a nation! Find the child!"

Several figures tore away from the rear of the mob and started smashing their way into the nearest homes. Their screams inspired others and suddenly the mob was a swarm filling every doorway and hollow.

The first baby they found was tossed atop the point of a spear before anyone even noticed its age.

Morgan ran headlong into the mob screaming.

The second child was older still.

Caught in the seething mass of hate, Morgan was hauled along to the next house and the next until it expelled her against a wall in its sideways rush for another prey. She held onto the wall as if it were her sanity, hung her head and vomited until she could not stand.

Bramble

Tree of Emotion

Morgan's journey home took much longer. She avoided contact with anyone and, once back within the borders of Rheged, spent several nights in prayer beside a glassy forest pool that was dedicated to Rhiannon.

The mayhem in the village still raged when she escaped, and so she was unaware that it had swarmed up to the caer and that Lot had been killed trying to quell it. Her ignorance then was for the best; she didn't need one more death to weep over.

The rest of the country heard, though, as news of the atrocities spread. And Merlin made sure that word of Morgan's part in the child's escape was widely known as well. His fury at losing the infant was immeasurable, yet he kept control over himself and the situation by devising a story that would both protect Arthur's reputation and ruin Morgan's. He said the leaders of the mob were overly zealous, self-appointed protectors of their King who had been driven to their frenzy by the discovery of Morgan's treacherous act. They had, Merlin announced, already been apprehended and banished -- the worst punishment for any Briton -- while the one who had indirectly caused the horror remained free.

By the time Morgan reached Caer Ysgrifennu, to which Uryen and his *teulu* had already returned, the people of Rheged were ready to tear Morgan apart. Even so, Merlin's revenge was not yet complete.

Uryen emerged from the main hall and stood like a block of iron before his wife, who had been immediately seized by the guards at the gates and brought to the open area. "Why did you come back?" he asked flatly, his eyes narrow and cold.

Shrouded in shock and defeat, Morgan stood limply between the two men holding her.

Uryen took three quick strides to stand only a hand's breadth from her and yelled, "What made you think you could?"

She might have answered, for she raised her head and took in a ragged breath, but before she uttered a sound Uryen turned from her and ordered, "Get her away from me!"

Immediately the men dragged her to the hut in the caer that she had claimed as her own, where she was to be confined under guard indefinitely. Though it was a solution that satisfied no one, it was the only one Uryen would allow.

behind Merlin's swirling cloak   Arthur bled with fear
his golden prospect stained with pernicious deed   and
dizzied by the children's lives and Lot's   lost   cried
out against   the deaths done in his name   yet cowered
by the story   of evil son and sister   he clung for
succour   to Merlin's bitter heart

In the early spring rain, as if formed from fog itself, grey eyed, grey haired, robed in ashen wool, Lile rode in through the gates of Caer Leon. Unannounced, unexpected she strode into Arthur's hall to stand, draped in the sacred mist of Avalon, before the King and his council.

All twenty-six were present, crouched in consultation, and at her entrance three rose slowly to their feet: Kei, first to join Arthur's *teulu* ; Bedwyr, the first Christian to give himself in service to the King; and Balin, Christian too, but new to both his service and religion.

Restraining Arthur, Merlin waited like a spider for the tremors on his web.

And Lile spoke, her voice a crashing thunder. "The soil of Britain has been poisoned. Poisoned by the blood of innocents. Yet even before that...by the sowers of Christianity, whose harvest has been fear and hate, doubt and deception. You, Merlin, and you, Arthur, must acknowledge the vile fruits of your own planting, just as I must claim my part in these horrors...made by not speaking out against your rule before now. I chose the weaker way, to use the silence of deception and wait for your vulnerability to betray itself. Now, everyone shall hear my words, and the Words of the Goddesses, who demand restitution or they will turn all British land rancid and barren. In the Old Way, Arthur, you must deliver up one of your warriors to Annwn...so that he may protect the children sent too young to those shores. And I shall send one of my bandrui to redeem your name and mine before Rhiannon."

Lile surveyed the group of silent men and then addressed the pale and trembling Arthur, "Tell me. Whom do you choose?"

Arthur looked to Merlin first, but the Advisor, his chin lightly resting on the point of his hands pressed palm to palm, did not take his eyes from Lile.

Hesitantly, Arthur regarded his council.

Bedwyr spoke first. "My Lord, you can not even contemplate this. A call for human sacrifice! It is against all Christian principles...all civilized ones! It will only serve to pour more blood at your feet."

Quickly Kei countered, "No. Bedwyr's wrong. You must make reparation, my Lord. Lady Lile is offering you the way to reclaim your honour. Take it." He glanced quickly at Merlin, "For the sake of Britain...for your own sake, take it."

Then, raising his fists, Balin cried out, "This is insanity! Is no one going to speak out against her slander of our fellow Christians? She is blaming all Christians for this!"

Merlin held up his hand to silence them all and rose slowly to stand squarely in front of Lile. She met his eyes easily. "Whom do you choose?" she demanded again.

Stepping forward, Kei offered himself. Ignoring Kei in favour of Merlin's glare, Lile insisted, "I shall choose then, if you will not," and shot her arm out to point at Balin.

Silencing the protests with a wave of his hand, Merlin turned back to Lile, "Neither I, nor the Druidic High Council has received the demand for a sacrifice from any of the gods...or goddesses. I must, therefore, consider if what you say is necessary. We will discuss your proposition."

With the calm of absolute conviction, Lile held Merlin's glare as the silence stretched between them. Then she told those iron grey eyes, "I *will* have your answer by morning." And she left to make her bed by the fires of her enemies.

After a long and volatile session, the council disbanded unresolved, each going off to his own fears. But Balin lingered.

Stretching and rising from his place by the fire, Merlin regarded the warrior with what almost seemed to be amusement. "And what is it you still need to say, Balin?"

The warrior was sweating, his tunic stained in dark crescents on his chest and under his arms. "You won't let this happen to me, will you?"

"Me?" Merlin replied, one eyebrow raised. "I'm not sure there's much *I* can do about it. Lile is still a person of some influence." The Advisor placed an arm companionably around the warrior's shoulders and walked him to the door. "But, I know you to be a man of strong conviction and more than capable of winning your own quarrels."

Balin's eyes darted to the blackness beyond the door and back at Merlin.

The Advisor slapped him on the back encouragingly. "We'll talk more in the morning. I'm sure things will be clearer then."

Balin wandered angrily past the round, docile dwellings and along the sturdy, angular, Roman barracks that were still a part of this mongrel caer. He wandered and muttered to himself until the moon was beginning to set. Then he went to his own house and drew his sword off the wall.

By torchlight he entered a small, square room in the barracks and as the sleeper stirred he raised his sword high.

Lile rolled over and opened her eyes in time to hear him hiss, "Evil! You are the Evil. You want the gods to have a sacrifice? Let them take yours!"

And strength of his judgement severed her head from her neck.

condemned   to the eye of the storm   the roar around her
deafening   Morgan heard Lile's scream only   as a cry
too late   and wept for what should have been   not yet
seeing the true embrace   of her teacher   but when the
whirling rush released her   to her own sphere   she

would come to know that she and Lile had always been
on either side of the same circle

Owein, at four, was always eager to play outside. "Come on, Mother." He pulled on Morgan's hand.

"Stay here. Play with me here. Mother can't go out right now."

Morgan couldn't remember - had it been a fortnight or a month since she'd been beyond this hut? A month, it must be, because the stars in the patch of sky that she watched through her chimney night after night seemed to have shifted a little.

She supposed Uryen had been generous with her, considering. Though the guards forbade her even a breath of the glossy spring air, she could have anything else she needed, including daily visits with Owein.

She pulled him down onto her lap and nuzzled his hair. Giggling, he still managed a little of his new found indignation as he extricated himself from her arms and plopped down on the straw beside her. "But I want to go out. I have something to show you."

Morgan ran a finger down his nose and tapped him lightly under the chin. "Someone will be coming for you soon anyway."

It was an effort not to let him see the sadness in her.

The sadness was a recent companion.

Shock had been first, which had quickly turned to fear upon her return. She and Accolon always knew how vicious an adversary Merlin would be if he ever discovered their part in Mordred's escape. Finding out for certain that he was behind the men in Gododdin, and that Enhinti had betrayed her first to Merlin and then Uryen, had raised terror in her about Accolon and the child. Did Enhinti, Accolon's cousin, know about his involvement as well? Uryen had asked her about Accolon and she had denied that he had played any part, but Uryen's ignorance did not guarantee Merlin's.

The news of Lile's murder brought hurt so deep that she had succumbed to despair, staring at her food as though it were an alien thing, sleeping until Owein came, and then sleeping again. Gradually, the lack of news about Accolon had roused her, sometimes to fear, sometimes to hope~~,~~ and her despair had mellowed to a deep sadness; a feeling that cloaked her rather than swallowed her whole.

Nothing, however, had pierced her determination to keep the whereabouts of Mordred secret.

As the days passed, she became more certain that Merlin still did not know that one thing, at least, because everyday Uryen insisted that she tell. He came into the house now with none of the warm spring sun in his eyes. "Go on," he said to Owein, "Enhinti's waiting for you."

Owein made a face. "But I want to show my mother something first."

"I said, go."

Pouting, Morgan's son went off to the fresh air without a look back.

Uryen's expression was grimmer than she'd ever seen it and she suppressed a shudder as he turned to address her.

"I've just received news from Caer Leon. On your status." He remained standing, his arms loose at his sides, though he kept opening and closing his fists.

Thus far, Uryen had insisted on his right to have his wife's crime dealt with by a council in Rheged, one that would be made up of the spokesmen for Rheged's tribes and presided over by Tegid. He had also managed to stall the council from calling her forward. It seemed to Morgan that he did so because he was plagued by some uncertainty, not about what she had done -- that he did not question -- but perhaps about how to handle it. Uryen hadn't really been the same man since having to concede to Arthur; indecision and indifference had replaced almost all his straighforward strength. Morgan knew it was because he had lost the thing of most value to him: his independence. Bowing to Arthur meant he had position without power. She thought part of him might be able to understand what she had done.

He turned away from her, feigning a distant interest in the herbs hanging on the walls. "You have to tell us where he is," he said with an urgency she had not heard before. Facing her once more, his look was one of pure despair. And she knew her worst imaginings were about to come true.

"You have to understand...the Druidic High Council has just made a pronouncement."

Morgan got slowly to her feet. "I understand all too well, Uryen. I can imagine what Merlin has persuaded them to say."

"Merlin was just elected Archdruid."

She felt the twist of nausea. "Then he no longer even needs to persuade." Confusion was replacing some of the darkness in Uryen's eyes. "Don't worry about how to say this to me. I knew it would come. They have declared the prophecy concerning Arthur's sister's child was misinterpreted. Right? That Britain's curse isn't Margawse's son. It's mine."

How pale he was. So pale his beard seemed a black shadow framing lifeless skin. Like death. He nodded slowly, "Evidenced by his mother's well-known words against Arthur's rule, and her recent act of treason. They're demanding I turn you and Owein over to them."

"But you won't." He would not look at her. "Uryen, this is insane!" She grabbed at his clothes. "You know what Merlin is doing. Didn't you guess that this would be his revenge?"

With a degree of gentleness, he pulled her hands from him, holding her for a moment. Then a long sigh escaped him and he let his hands slide away from her. Walking over to a wooden crate, which stood next to most of her jars and pots, he eased himself down to sit on it. "The message I received is, if you disclose the location of the child," he looked up at her, "Owein will be spared."

Beaten. He was beaten, she could see. And suddenly she was not as certain of him. She took a few steps towards him, "You don't believe this latest *prophecy* to be true, do you? You can't."

He looked away, at the cold hearth, at the floor.

"Uryen please," she dropped to her knees in front of him and took his hand. "They're talking about your son ."

Shaking his head, his hand limp in hers, he whispered, "I don't know what I believe."

"Yes you do!"

A spark of fire ignited in his eyes, but it was a cold fire, with flames of ice. He gripped her hand painfully.

"Please...tell me where the child is!"

"Never."

He threw her hand away and stood up so quickly he almost knocked her over. "Then you're as evil as they say you are. Condemning your own son!"

Slowly, deliberately Morgan rose to face him. The panic she saw in him would not become hers. Nor that hollow-eyed loss.

"No. I will not trade one life for another. I will not make any bargains with Merlin. And he will not touch my son!"

As she spoke, she could feel the strength from her Art pouring into her, from every object in this place, from the flowers and herbs and powders and salves, from the gleam of the sacred knives.

"I will stand against Merlin, and what he is doing to our British souls with my last breath. Me condemn Owein?" she moved menacingly towards him. "What about you? Are you just going to allow this to happen? Where is your courage?"

Clear rage filled his face. "What choice do you leave me?"

Her fault. He was going to make it all her fault.

"Morgan, don't you see?" Suddenly, his rage had dissolved back into torment. "I don't want what happened in Gododdin to happen here! The people," he waved behind him, "are terrified. They think there's an evil waiting to destroy them -"

"There is." She meant Merlin and he knew it, but he only shook his head as he moved towards the door.

At it he paused and turned back to her. "I can't let murders like that happen here." His tone was pleading with her to understand, to take the burden from him. "I can't."

But she hated him for his weakness and his pain, for the emptiness in him that would permit the decision to destroy his own son. So she turned her back on him, holding her breath and her tears until he left.

She would not send any child to its death. She would find a way to save Owein.

By evening she had cried too much. There was no relief in it and it made her thoughts clump like clouds before a storm.

She was watching her tears land one by one on her lap. Until she saw that they were really flawless glass beads laid side by side. And she felt each of her random, formless thoughts drawn inside one of the beads, made pure and clear beside the next until they became a flawless line of reason. She rose to wash her face and light her fire.

She went over to her jars and selected one filled with the seed pods of the corn-rose. After she boiled them, she poured the liquid into a bowl to cool and sat to wait. A meal, still untouched, had been left for her during Owein's visit and from it she retrieved a flask of wine. Testing the liquid in the bowl and deciding it was cool enough, she poured it into the flask.

Picking up the plate of food and the flask of wine, she went to call the guard at her door.

When he came in, she handed everything to him. "I don't want any of this. Throw it out." She released it, casually, and went back to her fire, but she watched him at the edge of her vision.

Wine. A luxury. Expensive and rare. One of Uryen's guilty kindnesses. She saw the guard peer into the flask. How could he resist it?

Once he was outside, she went to pull the hide back ever so slightly and watch. He looked around once, twice, and then took a long, long swallow.

Morgan went back to choose a knife. Her fire drowsed to embers and the guard slept. Finished with tying up the few things that she would take in a sack, she drew on her cloak and stepped past both into the liberating dark.

Through the honeycomb of houses, some still full of golden light, to the lean grey cocoon at the centre and all the poison within it, she walked without hurry, without hesitation.

Inside, he slept alone -- a coiled, black lump whose breath rose and fell, rose and fell in smooth indifference. The knife felt hard and strong in her hand.

Poised over him now in a pool of red light from the hearth, she watched as he rolled onto his back and settled into some bitter dream. The ease of his sleep did not surprise her; he no longer had a heart to beat with insistent pain. She drew the knife out from under her cloak.

There, under his beard, was a small white circle of throat, a home for her blade. Hanging over him, smelling the sleep on his breath, she looked at his face for the last time -- and stopped. Around his eyes, along his nose and cheeks ran the lines of what Owein would become. Suddenly she saw her son lying there, grown. And just as quickly she raised her knife again, remembering that Owein would never be grown if this man lived.

Uryen's hand shot up and wrenched her wrist. His other arm shoved her hard over onto her back and they grappled for only an instant before she was pinned.

"Morgan!" His breath came in harsh rasps. Incredulously he looked at her face, the knife, and back again. "Morgan."

He twisted the knife from her hand and threw it across the room. Then he sat back, keeping her legs locked underneath him and just stared at her. There was no anger in his eyes, only shock and hurt.

Inside her, the glass beads separated and shattered. What was she doing? How could she have thought of doing this? And the tears reclaimed her.

"No," he said softly, "You don't have to be afraid." Releasing her, he stood up slowly, as if he were in pain, as if she had managed to wound him. "I understand. This isn't treachery." He gazed down at her. "It's courage. You were right. I had...I almost lost mine."

Too stunned to rise, Morgan pushed herself up on her elbows and watched him walk away from her to the other side of the room. The shirt he wore looked red in the ember's glow, and the further he moved away from her the more his face was shadowed and gaunt.

Picking up the knife, he stared down at it, twisting it in his hands. "My son. What was I willing to risk to protect him?"

He looked back over at her, the reproach in his eyes only for himself. "You have my admiration, Morgan. And my assurance that I will no longer consider handing Owein over to anyone."

Dumbfounded, Morgan found herself standing, staring at the knife still in his hand, and wondering whether or not she should run past it now and get her child.

"No, I can't let you have him either." He shook his head sadly. "because I believe you will always be a danger to him. You will not stop fighting a war that no one else sees. And it's insanity."

"I'm not alone in this, Uryen," she cried out. "Lile died for it!" She felt desperate for words to explain the compelling sanity that burned in her. How could anyone call a fight for your own spirit and the spirit of your people, insanity?

"Likely, one day so will you," he said with even greater sadness. "Your beliefs and politics will only continue to hurt Owein. You have to understand that."

Though what he said tore into her more viciously than any knife, behind the pain she had a sudden vision of Ceridwen drawing the circle in the dirt.

"I will find a hiding place for him," Uryen said firmly, "until all this is over or forgotten."

And what of her? She waited for the circle to be closed.

"For Owein's sake...for your own ...Leave." Uryen motioned to the door, "Escape. Now..."

She hesitated, not wanting this moment to come.

"Now!" His eyes were desperate for her to obey. "Before

I change my mind."

The moon was a luminous eye, watching as Morgan rode away from Caer Ysgrifennu. Modron, please, Morgan begged, do not ask this of me. I cannot do this. I cannot forsake my son! The calm fragrance of mountain sorrel and pansy rose up from the heath, touching her tears. But she was not comforted. She raised her eyes to the moon. But found no beauty.

Then, unfolding itself from behind the moon, a shadow stretched its wings. Soundlessly it swooped down to settle on the ground before her. She halted her horse and held her breath.

Why must I do this? Where can I go?

Its black eyes snapping, snapping.

Take no thought   Do not let your doubt keep
you from me

And it flew up to circle Morgan's head, once, twice, three times. Morgan felt the peace settle into her. She bowed her head to it and offered up her sacrifice.

Ivy

Tree of Revelry

unclasped friendship   loosened by the distance   of
different roads   I loved Morgan still   and prayed
for her   safe journey down a path   I no longer saw
    ours   a time of change   one looked forward   the
other back   I to the prospect   of life everlasting
    she to the promised   continuance of life   while
yet we walked   we could not see   their circle to the
    same source   where we would join hands

Undulating ribbons of colour and noise ran from the sturdy wooden gates of Caer Leon all the way to the chalk walls of the amphitheatre. Excitement braided landowner, warrior, craftsman, freeman farmer and bonded peasant together with foreign visitor to form an odd harmony of language and dress: long-haired Britons parading in checked and striped patterns of blue, black, purple and green; Franks in similar colours but distinguishable by the knot of hair worn on the top of their heads and their women's knee length, flower entwined braids; short-cropped Gauls in tunics of scarlet, yellow and teal, their demure wives with coiled hair and white, circlet-held veil; tonsured monks in quiet, dun-shaded robes; and all with voices raised in good-will for Arthur and his new bride.

Now in his eighteenth summer, Arthur presided over a nation that was prosperous and powerful, even if not entirely content. Pockets of dissent remained regarding Arthur's policy of granting more and more land for the maintenance and founding of abbeys -- often by seizing land already promised to bardic, bandrui or druidic communities -- but most religious objections had been quelled by Merlin becoming Archdruid. The majority of Britons were content to doze in the new-found safety of their own borders and praise the King who managed it.

That King waited now in the centre of the ampitheatre to feast with his well-wishers. A sweet summer wind rippled his sky blue tunic against his muscled thighs and chest, and pulled tendrils of his bronze hair out to frame his face like rays of light. Next to him stood Gwenhwyvar, a tiny woman with rain-scented skin, whose green gown clung to her lush form; the daughter of Gwynedd and kin to Merlin on his mother's side. Though Arthur and Gwenhwyvar had never met before this day, they seemed paired by the gods.

The crowd swelled around them in wider and wider circles, making places in the long grass to sit and enjoy the food that the servants were beginning to bring from the Caer. The quantities required to feed the three hundred guests were more than anyone had ever seen, and gasps introduced every platter, every keg of wine and whole roasted boar that was brought in.

Merlin arrived to stand with the couple, chatting easily with both, making the shadows of tension disappear from their faces. Once the crowd had settled, the druid turned to formally introduce the King and his bride to the people, and a great cheer rose up, swallowing their names.

Suddenly the bards appeared, twenty of them, scattered through the tiers of the ampitheatre, and they strolled down the white steps calling the audience with the soft thrumming of their lyres. As they reached the celebrants, one of them stepped forward, his yellow hair flashing in the sun. Taliesin, Arthur's favourite bard, was going to give the song of tribute to Arthur. Moving circuitously through the guests, he carried them on a bracing current of words past praise for Arthur and his bloodline, through his thunderous victory at Badon, over each allegiance he had so magnificently won, and on to his future honour and glory. And each listener was enraptured by the unparalleled magic of Taliesin's talent.

When he was through he did not wait for praise, but went modestly over to sit with a group of monks, while the other bards continued the entertainment.

After the sun set, huge bonfires were lit and horse races began around the perimeter of the field. The crowd shifted its attention away from Arthur and Gwenhwyvar to cheer and wager on their favourite rider or horse; Arthur yelling louder than any.

Only two people seemed disinterested in this latest spectacle.

Merlin, as always, was beside Arthur; however, this time he also had someone beside him, on whom he ceaselessly doted. She was a woman half his age, with cool violet eyes and black hair marked by a single strand of white, and she accepted his attentions with mild amusement. Nimue, the recently made Lady of the Lake, Archpriestess of Avalon, was also the recent obsession of Merlin.

Since acquiring the title, Nimue had established ties of allegiance between Avalon and Arthur, and in so doing received more instead of less lands and wealth for her Circle. Her aim to achieve influence and power was being realized as she carefully chose her friends and her lovers.

Clearly she had worked some magic over Merlin, who paid less and less attention to anything other than Nimue. His furious hunt for Morgan and Owein after they disappeared was long over, as were his attempts to find Mordred. He seemed content to enjoy the power that was his through Arthur's popularity, and hunger only for Nimue.

She pressed her thin, white fingers against Merlin's cheek and ever so slightly pushed him away. "You were telling me something," she admonished with a smile. "Don't get distracted."

"What was I telling you?" Merlin traced her mouth, lingering on the moist centre of her lower lip.

Laughing, she nipped at his finger.

"Really. I can't remember."

She ran her hand through his greying hair. "Then tell me anything. Everything you know fascinates me. Sometimes..." she paused and looked at him wistfully, "I think you must be a god to understand all that you do."

Amazingly, Merlin seemed to believe her.

"Let's leave for a while," he suggested, slipping his arm around her waist. And she nodded, her black hair falling to shadow half her face.

When they were on the other side of the ampitheatre, pressed against its outer wall, the noise of the crowd blunted by the cliff of white stone, and he had pulled her skirt up over her hips, she whispered, "One day this will end."

"Never," he growled in her ear. "I'll never get enough."

While he pushed into her again and again, Nimue patiently stared at the not so distant Caer Leon.

Since coming to live beside the well, often Morgan's nights were filled with fragrance. When the moon was the luminous eye of Modron or Rhiannon, then she would gather rattle-grass and orpine, winter green and water cress. When only a silver sickle pierced the black sky, she would harvest briony and brooklime, camomile and water-fern. And her hut would be full of sweet or harsh parcels hanging on her walls and from her ceiling.

For those the people came to see her, the bandrui who guarded the well. Or, for the favour of Andraste, who claimed it.

Sometimes Morgan thought she saw the goddess: the curled and rotted hag in a shroud of night mist, the glorious and sinuate beauty wreathed in morning sun.

The goddess who knew no Christians.

In an afternoon, or a morning, when the ground was swollen with rain, when the sun made steam rise up from it, someone who came for a potion told her that Arthur had taken a wife.

"She's as beautiful as the spring. Young, sweet -- the King wouldn't have her otherwise -- spoiled, vain. Prey to flattery."

Once, when the sun was small and pale behind a thin wash of grey, when the damp air fell to the ground in clumps of cold gossamer, when the forest stood in the tatters of desiccated leaves, another man came. A trader or a craftsman or a herdsman, he sat by the nestings of Morgan's settled fire and told her an even more remarkable story.

That Merlin was obsessed with a woman whose skin smelled of violets. That in her taloned embrace he cried with desire. That all his words now began with her name: Nimue.

And that she was Avalon's Lady.

Nimue - leaning back on her elbows, letting the sun touch her pale cheek and brush against spidery lashes.

"I won't spend my life with my hands plunged in the dirt, nurturing and harvesting, waiting on the will of the goddesses."

Lying on her side, head resting on one delicate arm, plucking grass, dangling an ant on a single, knife-edged blade. "The things you really want, you have to manage for yourself."

"The gods don't care, Morgan. They don't. So why should I?"

Nimue. The Lady of Avalon. As she had always wanted.

Then, on one of the winter days when the well was crusted with ice, when the chill of her isolation numbed her, a rider came with a sack of corn or a skin of ale as tribute to the goddess and instead gathered her up into his arms, his tears melting the snow on her cloak.

Accolon! Holding her, warming her with the breath of his words. "I found you...finally...for a year I've sought every rumour of an isolated bandrui..."

"You were gone, Uryen dismissed me, I thought I'd lost everything."

And after they lay together quietly, wiping warm tears from each other's cheeks, remembering shared laughter.

A long time later, when the serene sweetness of wet earth permeated skin and bone and breath, when drops of red and gold hung, shimmering, on the trees, a family who lived nearby, or who were journeying north, told her that Merlin was dead.

Dotingly, at Nimue's bidding, he'd journeyed too far in foreign lands. Fell to a ruinous languor even while in the capable hands of his lover.

Nimue, so quick to learn.

"You have to wrap your hands, Morgan. Don't you remember what Our Lady said? To gather this type of Nightshade, you have to wrap your hands. Or you'll fall down here to sleep...and never wake up."

Nimue laughing, and Merlin. Merlin was dead.

Dwarf Elder

Tree of Confirmed Power

for Arthur   alone   like fog which wreathed round familiar form   makes it indistinct   Merlin's death left doubtful   the lines of his command   the vision of his rule   lost in corrupted eyes   and rashly he sought to redefine   the image of a god-sent prince   prove his power by demanding adoration   with reckless words and random embrace   he sought certainty in reflection   in the temporary glitter   of a rival's acquiescence   in the transient gleam   of a lover's regard

Morgan and Accolon spent two happy years together, and Morgan might have never left him if not for a stronger call to her heart.

At Accolon's insistence, after her year of isolation when no one even knew her name, she had tenuously renewed contact with a few bandrui Circles - not Avalon, though, where Nimue was. Accolon said there was no reason for her to believe that she was universally despised when she still had more than a few like-minded supporters in the Circles, which continued to suffer under Merlin's policy. He knew because he had gone to them first to look for her, immediately assuming that they would give her shelter.

The depth of Morgan's despair when she left Caer Ysgrifennu must have been very great for her not to have even considered them.

He had been right; the Circles had been welcoming, glad to hear from Lile's most beloved student.

But Morgan remained at the well, living with the man she loved instead of giving herself over to the celibate sanctuary of a Circle. Only one Circle could have drawn her away. And it did in her third year of hiding.

One month after Morgan heard about Merlin's death, the Bandrui High Council sent word that Nimue had abandoned Avalon and that they wanted Morgan to replace her.

Still dusty from his day's work as a herdsman, Accolon went to wash his face instead of responding to Morgan's news. He stayed a long time at it, splashing the cold water over his face and around his neck over and over again.

Morgan placed a soothing hand on his shoulder and handed him a towel. "I didn't immediately say yes, my love. I only said I'd consider it."

Accolon tried to smile, kissed her lightly on the cheek and went to start the fire.

"You don't want to talk about this, do you?" Her tone was gentle.

Sighing, he looked up at her from his crouched positon at the hearth. "I didn't want to hear it. But now that it's out..." He sighed once more and patted the ground for her to come and sit beside him. "What are you thinking?" he asked as she joined him.

Morgan began softly, as though she really were only considering. "Avalon holds more power now than when Lile was alive, thanks to Nimue. The land it controls, the people who work that land...it has a real voice."

"And that excites you." He was not asking.

"It scares me. I've spent considerable time avoiding public notice." Morgan looked truly uneasy but Accolon shook his head, disputing her concern and her sentiment.

"They wouldn't have offered it to you if they thought there'd be a problem. Merlin's dead, Morgan. And where are Arthur's teeth without him? They want someone as capable as Nimue but with the right allegiances. Someone to speak for their side."

"But Arthur must still believe I wish him harm."

"Maybe. Who knows what he believes now that he's on his own. And anyway," he shrugged, "it won't matter. He'll have to listen to and deal with whomever is installed at Avalon. The title would vindicate you, Morgan."

The crackling of the fire filled the silence that sat heavily between them. Accolon poked at the blaze unnecessarily and Morgan stayed his hand.

"Are you trying to talk me into this?" she asked incredulously.

His eyes pained, he turned slowly to face her. "If I thought there was any way to talk you *out* of accepting," he answered with a voice that struggled to be strong, "I'd do it. I'm just trying to tell you that...I understand. "

Morgan did not believe she had ever loved Accolon more than during those last few months together. He never weakened in his support of her decision to go to Avalon, never asked her to change her mind. And he never let her cry.

So she spent her days and nights in a strange kind of ambivalence: thrilling to the thought of being inducted fully into the Art and made Avalon's Lady, and agonizing over the thought of leaving the only person who had ever truly understood her.

But the pull of her committment to Modron was stronger than anything else.

She was expected in Avalon on the night in Elder which marked the longest of the year. The celebration mourned the passing of the night and rejoiced in the return of the sun; the waning time of the Eternal Circle, forever ending and beginning, was to be the start of her time at Avalon.

Just before she was to leave, she received news that made her believe Modron was again calling her to act, even before she reached the shores of the fortress.

Talk was everywhere that there was a serious falling out between Arthur and several of the most powerful abbeys. Details were few, so Morgan could only assume that with Merlin gone Arthur was either unwilling or unable to make his policies conform to those of the Christians. In either case, it seemed to her conditions were right to try to mend the breach between Arthur and his British spirit.

Apparently Arthur had been persuaded by his council to make a personal visit to Cadoc, the abbot of Llancarfan, and begin renegotiations. Morgan wanted to talk with him first, before anyone or anything else could influence him, and maybe reach the part in him that they both shared, help him take hold of his true heritage.

And as a symbol of that heritage she would return to him what she had felt called to retrieve during her flight from Caer Ysgrifennu and preserved carefully ever since - Lile's sword. It was how she was sure Lile meant him to understand the gift all those years ago.

Because of the lack of time before she was to be at Avalon and the immediacy of Arthur's pending visit to the abbot, she asked Accolon to go to Caer Leon and tell Arthur that Avalon's new Lady would like to speak with him, and that she would be willing to meet with him at Llancarfan. The abbey was on her way to Avalon and besides wanting to talk with Arthur before he reconceded to the Christians, she hoped

Arthur would see her proposed location as an indication of her peaceful intentions. The sheer irony of meeting her in an abbey should at least make him wonder.

Accolon consented, even though it meant he had to leave before her last night at the well. She thought perhaps he found some comfort in the idea of riding away from her rather than staying behind to watch her leave.

She was not prepared for the pain she felt at being the watcher.

Accolon was allowed to wait inside the main hall because of the cold weather. He stood next to the doorway, waiting for Arthur to extricate himself from a discussion with a remarkably beautiful woman.

The woman was Nimue, who had left Avalon to take Merlin's place at Arthur's side, and who, though not a druid, more than adequately filled Arthur's need for a guiding hand. Her knowledge and her acumen were, if anything, superior to her predecessor's. Finally Nimue had achieved all the power she had wanted.

But Accolon did not know who she was, having never seen her, and stood politely disregarding the pair's conversation. If he and Morgan had concerned themselves with wondering why

Nimue had left Avalon or where she might have gone, Accolon would undoubtedly have been wary much sooner. As it was, it took Arthur's mention of her name to bring him to full but disguised attention.

"I don't know, Nimue. She hasn't done anything in three years..."

"Think about it," Nimue snapped. "What could she do? Her hostilities didn't just disappear in that time. They festered. I know her. Now that she's managed to maneuver herself into a position of power at Avalon, she'll be more dangerous than ever." Nimue had every right to fear the only competitor she had never been able to best. Adamant that Arthur listen, she grabbed his arm. He accepted her forwardness without a questioning glance.

"You should put out an order for her death now. Before she claims her title."

Now Arthur pulled away, looking confused. "I can't do that. She'd have to be brought before council and have that judged as her punishment --"

"You can do anything you want," Nimue hissed. "You're the King!"

Before Arthur could acknowledge his presence, Accolon slipped back out into the winter storm.

on untilled ground   Arthur was condemned to walk   his
presence unacknowledged in the cycle of the soil   through
him no past or future fruit would survive   and solitary
he would remain   his seed fallow in a barren wife
    withered in an unclaimed son   scattered
indistinguishably in a hundred fields   and he would come
to fear   what would be his in the bloodless red   of a
harvest sky

Morgan left the hazelwoods and rode out across a white plain. Only the wind claimed this land, rippling the snow like waves under its touch. The sky was taken too, brought closer to the ground and filled up with ashen clouds. Yet under the crystalline cold was the scent of the sea.

By mid-day she had reached the first of the Llancarfan's tenant farmer's huts, a dreary, damp mound left at the edge of its section of rented field. Shortly after, she passed another hut, and then another. All the same. And under the even grey of the sky, over the uniform white of the land, she would not have known if she had been travelling in a circle. Except that the smell of the sea was stronger.

Then, draped on the horizon was the thicker grey of smoke and underneath -- a small, dark ring of stone. If Morgan had expected something ominous or imposing she must have been disappointed. The abbey was only a smudge under an indifferent sky.

Perched atop gentle cliffs which rolled down to dark grey waters, Llancarfan was located on the headlands of a long and fertile plain. A closer view showed it to be much like any Caer, larger than it first appeared, with sturdy ramparts, a main gate and towers.

Morgan slowed her horse's pace a little as she approached. Wisely, she had planned not to enter the abbey as the Lady of Avalon. The Christians were keenly aware of her antagonistic sentiments and her sudden appearance there would only serve to alienate the inhabitants or make them defensive, and make her appear aggressive, as though she were hunting Arthur down and routing him out of the enemy's clutches. So she had concocted a story to gain her an unobtrusive admittance.

The problem was, Morgan had forgotten that her solitary journey itself made her distinctive.

Coming out of his small shelter to greet her, the gate keeper stayed her horse and peered up at her, "How may we help you, sister?" A short man, as wide as he was tall, he was dressed in a long, coarse robe the colour of sand, and wheezed as he waddled his way over to stand by the right side of her horse.

"I come seeking shelter. For a few days, I hope."

He looked at the snowy expanse of field behind her, at her well-packed belongings, and the casualness of her air and then said, "You travel alone?"

She responded to the doubt in his eyes quickly with an addition to her story. "Yes, I'm a recent widow and I must make my way alone back to my kin. I thought I could find safe shelter here."

"You certainly can, good woman." He signalled her to dismount. "I'll have someone show you to our guesthouse." He opened a small peep-hole in the gate and shouted, "Brother! We have a guest." And as he turned back to her the wide, timber gate swung slowly open. "And I'll make sure someone takes care of your belongings."

"No," Morgan said hurriedly, untying her own packs. "I can manage."

Another monk, a soft-spoken, grey haired man, walked towards her with arms extended in welcome. "As you wish, sister. But I can assure you, we have no thieves here." He smiled warmly. "Here, let me take these at least." He lifted off the sacks that contained her food.

"Thank you, brother?"

"Ceirill. And you?"

"Ygraine."

"Well, Ygraine, have you been to an abbey before?" It was a pleasant question, without suspicion.

"No, brother, I haven't."

He guided her down the central road. "I didn't think so. We don't get many women as guests, though you're certainly welcome," he added quickly. "We serve through charity."

Morgan only gave a brief smile as comment, paying more attention to the strangeness of her surroundings.The monk responded by elaborating on the buildings as they passed them. "Straight ahead, as you might guess, is our chapel...and beside it, our cemetery...where we bury the dead."

Morgan's eyes lingered on the group of stone obelisks, standing like petrified warriors.

"And over here..." he pointed proudly, "is our *scriptorium*, where we reproduce the gospels."

Morgan looked at him blankly.

He continued, not noticing her reaction, "We are presently producing the Gospel of John."

Just as they passed, a monk emerged from the *scriptorium* and blinked at the daylight. Then he stared after the pair and suddenly rushed up to them, tapping Morgan on the shoulder. "Excuse me..."

The shock of seeing who addressed her caused her to take a step back. It was not a monk who addressed them at all, even though he was wearing the same dun-coloured robe as the rest. "Tay," she whispered.

"Well, now, "Ceirill interjected pleasantly, "do you two know one another?"

Their silence put Ceirill on his guard. "You do know one another," he insisted. "Taliesin?" He turned to the bard for explanation.

"Yes...uh," Taliesin hesitated, looking at Morgan not Ceirill. "...We grew up together." His expression was soft and reassuring.

Ceirill looked from one to the other. "You and Ygraine..."

"Yes," Taliesin reaffirmed, smiling widely now, "but Ygraine and I haven't seen each other for a long while."

Ceirill was obviously intensely curious, and with good reason. Morgan had just changed from being a needy passerby to a long-time friend of the famous Taliesin.

"Brother Ceirill," Taliesin continued, "I'd be happy to show Ygraine to the guest house."

Hesitating only for a moment, Ceirill smiled politely and handed the rest of Morgan's belongings to the bard. "Of course you'd enjoy the time to talk. I'll see you both at the evening meal then." And amicably though a bit disappointedly, he took his leave.

When Ceirill was well out of earshot, Taliesin started casually to follow in the same direction. There was nothing casual about his words, however.

"Morgan. I can hardly believe I'm looking at you. It is so good to see you. Safe. Well. But what are *you* doing *here* ?"

"Tay," she touched his arm, "thank you for not giving me away."

"Simply the paradox of finding you in an abbey. The shock of seeing you, though, almost made me blurt out your name." He placed his hand affectionately on her shoulder. "How have you been? Where have you been?"

"Which one would you like me to answer first." She lowered her voice as a group of three monks passed by, nodding a greeting.

"The first one."

Once the monks were gone she answered, though still softly, "I came to see Arthur."

Taliesin looked puzzled. "Arthur?"

"Yes." She caught his expression and urgently grabbed his arm to stop him. "I hope he hasn't arrived yet."

Looking astonished, Taliesin shrugged. "I didn't know he was expected."

She looked up at him in disbelief. "Surely you must have. He's coming to talk with Cadoc."

Shaking his head, and continuing their walk, he answered mildly, "I haven't been much concerned with the world lately. I've been spending my time here in silence...devoting myself to it. And learning to write. My words are learning to find their voice on a scroll." Then seeing the incomprehension in her eyes, he added, "Yes, I'm still Arthur's bard. I asked him to grant me a leave two months ago."

"He let you go, just like that?"

Taliesin grimaced and added, "I don't get on well with

Nimue. He thought some time away might soften the edge."

Again Morgan's face registered shock. "Nimue is with Arthur?"

"You didn't hear that?" he asked in mild surprise.

They came to an area which was taken up by four rather large, long, timber and thatch buildings. Taliesin stopped in front of the first one.

"No," Morgan answered finally as she studied the ground, thinking.

Taliesin laughed a little and shook his head, "Funny how news gets passed along, isn't it? No one ever hears the whole story. Only the story they want to hear. Yes, Nimue's with Arthur...*all* the time."

Even more pensive, Morgan chewed at the corner of her lip.

"Judging from your expression," he continued, "I assume the Nimue you knew is pretty much the same as the one I know. Don't worry, though. I'm sure you're more than capable of dealing with her...once you're at Avalon, I mean.

"Yes, " he smiled widely, "I heard that much, at least, before I came here. Congratulations, Morgan. I believe that's exactly where you were always meant to be."

Morgan accepted his kiss with a slight smile in return, but she still seemed preoccupied with the news.

Taliesin tried to distract her by explaining where they were. "This," he indicated the building beside them, "is the guesthouse. And over there," he pointed to the building which lay opposite," is the *refectory* where we eat. Those other two...one's a school and one's an infirmary. You might be interested in the latter."

"I'm only interested in seeing Arthur," she said abruptly, and headed into the guesthouse.

Taliesin followed her in and stood in the doorway, a shadow framed in sunlight. They were alone.

"This area is for male guests," he explained gently as she began to distribute her things amongst the belongings of others already scattered across the floor. "Women", he indicated the doorway which led to the building's other room, "sleep on that side. There's a hearth there too. Someone will be in at sunset to make the fires."

Once he'd helped her settle into the other room, which was completely empty, he urged her to talk.

She explained that she wanted to reach out to Arthur one more time, before he reconciled with the Christians. Perhaps there was still a chance to persuade him to put Britain's gods, his gods, first.

Taliesin listened without comment, except to explain what he knew: that the trouble with the abbeys lay in their wish to be granted a special status, which would make them exempt from having to pay tribute. They wanted to keep all the profit of their acquired lands; the loss in financial support to Arthur would be enormous. It was not likely, in Taliesin's opinion, that Arthur could withstand such a loss, regardless of his feelings.

He took her hands and kissed her on the cheek. "I hope you find some common ground with him, but I doubt it. Arthur's not much of a thinker. And I'm sure he's never felt the kind of loneliness or wonder that makes you search for something beyond yourself. He's well protected and supported. Merlin's death made no difference. He's still the shadow of someone else."

Morgan shook her head firmly. "I don't believe there's nothing inside him. He's my brother. We share some of the same blood. There is something inside him. It just needs to be touched and nurtured."

"That hope," he suggested, "may be entirely due to your perspective of having found the centre inside yourself. I know. I've found it too. And though I believe it to be waiting, like the bud of a flower to open in each one of us, I also believe that you have to turn your whole will over to seeking it out before it will claim you. Arthur has already given his will over to something else."

"You don't believe another can lead you to it?" Morgan admonished gently. "You, who have been converted?"

"I believe God leads you to it, Morgan. When you acknowledge that you need Him to."

"Or Her."

In response, Taliesin only smiled and took her hand.

Morgan spent two days in the company of Taliesin, strengthening their new-found friendship and understanding. Each no longer felt alone; each understood their part in a magnificent plan. And so they met, consoled.

At the end of the second day, Arthur arrived. Just as the first specks of starlight glittered in the purple sky, the King and his small escort of six rode in through the dusk and were greeted by the monks without ceremony. After a private dinner with Cadoc, Arthur and his party were shown to private accomodations among the bee-hive shaped *cells* of the brothers, while the warriors were sent to the guesthouse. But Morgan wasn't there to see the men arrive. She was still with Taliesin.

Night brought a vengeful wind. It rose up off the sea, carrying the chill of those dark waters with it, and tore across the resistant land to clear the way for winter's longest night, now just one sunrise away.

Morgan pulled up the hood of her cloak at the first blast of wind, which greeted her as she and Taliesin emerged from the refectory. They had lingereed over thier sparse meal, talking. After they parted, Morgan decided to go for a walk.

The wind battered at her, but she persisted past the cells in the direction of the main gate. There were few people out now, and the cells were dark and quiet.

As she rounded a corner to walk down a new lane of cells, she saw a regally dressed warrior, tall, solidly built, ahead of her. Startled by the sight, she stopped just as he ducked into one of the cells himself. She took a few steps forward, stopped again and then turned quickly to abandon her walk and return to the guesthouse.

Inside, the three new occupants immediately caught her attention. Indeed, they had everyone's attention, as the others clustered around the hearth to talk to warriors from Arthur's teulu. Morgan slipped discretely by them to the still empty women's side and the corner she had claimed for herself. Out of sight, she withdrew the wrapped sword hidden in the furs of her bed and carried it under her cloak back outside.

Hurrying, she returned to the cell into which Arthur had entered. It would have been better if she had taken even a moment to wonder why he had not made his presence in the abbey known to her, because as she arrived at Arthur's cell, a late arrival rode up to the main gate.

Tired, ill-kempt, agitated, Accolon entered the abbey after cautiously following Arthur since the King's departure from Caer Leon. He had fallen behind because his horse had gone lame, making his progress much slower. But he had not given up.

Morgan paused at the cell's wooden door, which had been left partly ajar to help dissipate the smoke from the fire within. Laughter, casual and warm, trailed out from behind it.

Suddenly, someone yanked her away from the door. It was one of Arthur's warriors and he shook her gruffly.

"What are you doing there? What do you want?"

"I'm here to see Arthur," Morgan answered with equal brusqueness. "He's expecting me."

The man eyed her slowly, appraising her face and figure and then with a smirk that said he found such an idea clearly unlikely, he challenged, "He is, is he? Let's go see him, then." With a shove, he propelled her through the doorway.

"Arthur," Morgan said as soon as she saw him, her hood falling off, revealing her copper hair.

All trace of casualness was gone as Arthur abruptly stood up from his place by the fire and the conversation he was sharing with Cadoc and Nimue. "Morgan!" he gasped, as though she were an apparition.

"Morgan?" The warrior still holding her paled. "She said you were expecting her, my Lord."

Obviously shocked by the sight of Nimue, Morgan stumbled out an apology. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be alone." She took her eyes off the woman and looked back at her brother.

"Alone?" Arthur asked. "I don't understand. Bedwyr, where did you find her?"

"Outside. Listening."

Now Cadoc rose, looking concerned. "I was told her name was Ygraine..."

"Oh no, abbot," Nimue clarified, still sitting by the fire, still seemingly calm. "She's the King's sister. The new Lady of Avalon. She kept her identity from you, did she abbot?" Nimue added, rising now and moving to stand beside Arthur. "I find that interesting. But not as interesting as finding out that she was looking for the King to be alone." She grasped Arthur's sleeve. "I told you she'd be planning something."

"I sent a message that I wanted to meet you here, Arthur," Morgan answered angrily.

When Arthur only frowned and shook his head, Morgan moved to draw Lile's sword out from under her cloak. "To give you this."

Instantly, Bedwyr grabbed the offering away from her and unwrapped it.

"She was armed!" Nimue shrieked. "That's why she wanted to find you alone."

"You must have received my message." There was desperation now in Morgan's voice.

"Arthur received no such message," Nimue answered quickly and then urged Arthur again. "She's concocting a story to hide her real intentions."

With Nimue's last words, all trace of confusion in Arthur left and he turned cold eyes on Morgan. "Get her out of here, Bedwyr."

Quickly, the warrior tossed the sword aside and pulled Morgan's arms in a tight grip behind her.

"And Cadoc," Arthur turned to the abbot. "Perhaps you could show my man where she might be held...*securely.*" A white-faced Cadoc hurried to comply.

Struggling against his grip, Morgan insisted, "The sword is a gift, Arthur! Lile's gift to you at your sanctioning. Remember?"

"That was stolen," he snarled. "By you?"

"I *saved* it for you."

Nimue stepped forward, hatred marring her beauty with harsh angles. "For just this purpose, I'm sure. I know her mind, Arthur. She'd see your death by Lisle's sword as quite fitting."

Morgan glared at Nimue. But before she could speak again, Bedwyr started to shove her toward the door.

"Let's go find somewhere for you to spend the night." Keeping his hold on her, Bedwyr maneuvered her outside, where Cadoc waited nervously.

But before the trio could take one step away from the cell, an armed man coming up the lane yelled out, "Let her go!"

Now it was Morgan who looked as though she were seeing an apparition. "Accolon!" The word was torn from her by the wind.

He looked desperate, tortured. Slowly he withdrew his sword to emphasize his words.

Wary, Bedwyr released Morgan and moved a little away from her to draw his own weapon. "You brought help, I see," he said coldly, just as Arthur and Nimue emerged from the cell into the chill night air.

"Accolon!" Panic filled Morgan's voice, but she hesitated instead of running to him.

"They're going to order your death, Morgan. I overheard them."

"Spies too, Morgan?" Nimue asked. "I'm impressed." Her black wool cloak was flattened by the wind against her slight figure, outlining her like a shadow.

"I had to come, Morgan," Accolon finished, glaring at Nimue. "I can't lose you to this treachery."

"Treachery?" Arthur stepped forward to challenge Accolon. "It seems clear enough to me now that my Advisor was well informed. And," he moved to grasp Morgan once more, nodding to Bedwyr as the man positioned himself to protect his King, "she was also right to insist that I put an end to this."

Morgan jerked roughly away from her brother's touch, but he was much stronger than she and she could not loosen his hold.

"Don't touch her," Accolon warned, the fever in his eyes growing brighter.

Morgan spoke firmly, "Accolon...Arthur...listen to me."

"Let her go, my Lord," Accolon continued over Morgan. "She doesn't mean you any harm." He looked lovingly at her, "She couldn't..."

And sadly, firmly, he turned back to the King. "Think for yourself." He nodded in Nimue's direction. "You're being lied to, for reasons that have nothing to do with your safety."

Arthur blanched and darted a glance at Nimue, who stood with her hand clutching her throat. She gave him a wounded look in return.

Drawing himself up, Arthur faced Accolon squarely. "I know whom to believe."

With a sigh, Accolon shook his head. "You're a fool, Arthur. Even worse, you're a fool who thinks he's wise."

Rage flared on Arthur's face and he stepped forward, letting go of Morgan. "Raise you sword, traitor!" he challenged, drawing out his own - the red and gold sword given to him by the abbot, Dyfrig.

Accolon hesitated.

"Raise it!"

Bedwyr tossed Arthur a shield.

"No! Wait!" Morgan insisted. "Both of you. Listen to me. You don't need to fight. We need to talk!"

As though it were too heavy for him, Accolon lifted his own shield off his back.

Then Arthur charged, swinging his sword high to clang hard against Accolon's shield. The wind scattered the sound, tearing it into a thousand piercing needles.

Accolon countered, jabbing at his opponent's unprotected side under the raised sword arm. But Arthur was faster, and brought his shield across to knock the blow aside. Twisted together too closely to make another strike, each man staggered back, instantly ready.

From out of every cell, the monks came, and behind them, Arthur's men struggled to get through.

Arthur feigned a high stroke, slicing instead just under Accolon's rising shield.

Accolon was ready, though, and brought his shield down sharply, cracking on the blade, making Arthur falter with the blow. In his instant of advantage, Accolon swung, cutting deeply into Arthur's shield arm. Arthur countered with a vicious swing at Accolon's head.

Morgan screamed and bit her lip.

Accolon ducked with a return to his opponent's legs. The King jumped clear and slammed his body into Accolon's, knocking both men to the ground.

Accolon was up first, but Arthur swung while still on one knee. His sword bit into Accolon's calf and Accolon stumbled and fell, loosing his grip on his sword. Leaping up, Arthur kicked the sword out of reach and swiftly turned to catch Accolon in the neck with his foot.

But Accolon rolled away, landing on his feet and looking around desperately for his sword. He had rolled the wrong way. It lay on the other side of Arthur.

Seeing Arthur's advantage, his men held back, allowing their King an honourable kill.

With everyone's attention off her, Morgan darted back into Arthur's cell.

Arthur charged and Accolon waited until the last instant before he ducked and rolled under Arthur's blade, using his shield as cover.

Morgan ran back out holding Lile's sword and screamed at Accolon. Then she threw the sword as hard as she could. Amazingly he caught it.

Arthur's men moved menacingly forward, but Arthur ordered them to stay back. "He's mine," he yelled.

Strike after strike and still neither man had a clear advantage. Sweat poured down their foreheads and blood soaked their leggings and their tunics.

Suddenly, Arthur stepped back to dodge a blow, miscalculated, and Accolon gashed his thigh. He fell hard, his sword and shield flying from his grasp.

Leaping on top of him, Accolon pressed sharply on Arthur's chest with his foot and placed the point of his sword against the fallen man's neck. The fury that clouded Accolon's eyes seemed to dissipate for a moment.

It was Arthur's honour that held the warriors back, but only barely. They would not disgrace Arthur by interfering now unless he called for them. But the moment after Arthur died, Accolon would be dead too.

"What are you waiting for?", Arthur demanded.

The challenge roused Accolon again. He gripped Lile's sword in both hands and the muscles in his arms tensed for the thrust.

Morgan screamed, "Accolon! No!"

Her voice startled him and he looked away, just long enough for Arthur to grab the shield within reach of his other arm and bring it up hard against Accolon's wounded leg.

Accolon staggered, white with pain, and fell heavily to the ground. Quickly, Arthur wrested Lile's sword from his grasp and stood warily over his challenger.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, Accolon raised himself slowly. But before he could fully stand, Arthur took his advantage.

With all his weight Arthur thrust, breaking the point of his weapon through Accolon's back. Wavering, still on his knees, Accolon hung suspended in silence on Lile's sword.

Arthur placed his foot against the man's shoulder to push him off and Accolon fell, his last breath like a sigh.

Morgan started to run to him, but Arthur ordered Bedwyr and another of his warriors to restrain her. Though she pulled desperately against their grasp, she could not gain one step nearer her lover.

Breathing heavily, Arthur came up to stand very close to her and spit out the accusation. "You came here with your lover to kill me!"

"No," Morgan said weakly. "No. I came alone." She did not take her eyes from Accolon's crumpled form.

"Don't lie!" Menacingly, Arthur stepped closer to her and roughly raised her chin so that she would look at him.

"I'm not," she answered slowly. She looked weary, empty. "I would never do anything against you."

"Ha! And what have you been doing then, all these years?"

"I came alone, Arthur, to talk with you, as your sister. And bring you something you'd lost."

He glanced at the bloodied sword he still held and stared at it as though noticing it for the first time. "This."

At the sight of the sword, Morgan began to cry, shutting her eyes against the tears. "Yes. What you've really lost."

"She's babbling. Why question her. She came here to kill you." Nimue's voice chiseled the air like frost, and she came to Arthur's side, the hem of her gown dancing across the bloodied ground.

"No, my Lord!" Taliesin's voice shot through the air. He pushed his way through the crowd and glared at Nimue. "Don't listen to her. Listen to Morgan."

Arthur stared at his bard, questioningly.

"I *know* Morgan, my Lord, " Taliesin emphasized.

The ice around Nimue broke. "So do I! Look at her, Arthur. Think! Morgan, the infamous anti-Christian, *inside* an abbey. Why did she come here to meet with you? As Avalon's Lady she could have met with you anywhere. *But no where else would you have been so unguarded*. She must have lied to get in here. Unless she had help." She gave Taliesin a venomous glare.

Before Taliesin could refute Nimue, Morgan spoke quietly in her own defense. "I wanted to talk with you before you renegotiated with the abbeys --"

"See! See!", Nimue screeched.

Now Cadoc stepped forward. "If it was her purpose even to just ruin our talks..."

"No!" Taliesin insisted. "That wasn't it."

Arthur no longer looked convinced of anything. He studied each face around him ending with Morgan's. He seemed to be waiting.

"I did not come to harm you," Morgan said softly.

"But your lover did."

"Apparently to protect me from you."

"I want no one's death," Arthur stated firmly.

"Neither did I." Then, gathering her strength, Morgan insisted, "Arthur, I have to choose who to believe in this as much as you. And I decide to believe you - that you didn't order my death. Now you have to know that I came here in friendship...as the Lady of Avalon...and as your sister. I have always been...will always be your sister. Your blood. And because of that, I want to offer you a part of your heritage that has been kept from you."

"Don't listen to her." Nimue had lowered her voice, its sinuous tones winding around her words. "You can't take the chance."

Arthur looked at the ground, considering.

Swiftly, Nimue continued, not giving anyone the chance to interrupt her. "You can't dismiss this. Remember," she lowered her voice even further, "we are in the *middle* of Llancarfan." She looked pointedly over at the stern face of Cadoc. "You must take action against her now."

Arthur returned his gaze to Morgan, and said slowly, "Maybe you're right, Nimue."

Nimue touched his arm with undiguised glee. "It's all you can do."

"But," Arthur said firmly, "I won't demand her death."

Taken aback, Nimue persisted, "Even her bringing that sword here, to these talks, no matter what her intent, is an act of opposition. She has always and will always work to your ruin. You *can't* have her in a position of power."

Arthur ran his hand over his mouth and down his beard.

Taliesin let his warm voice drift across to his King. "She brought the sword to give you strength, my Lord."

Ignoring them both, Arthur raised his hand for silence. "I've made up my mind. I banish her."

It was a punishment Britons considered worse than death, but the monks grumbled noisily.

He came quickly up to Morgan, then, and spoke just to his sister. "So you think I don't want you in Avalon? You're wrong. It's to there I banish you...never to set foot on the mainland of Britain again."

Morgan managed a difficult breath.

"This is ridiculous!" Nimue interjected. "She'll still be the Lady of Avalon."

Arthur nodded calmly. "But without any lands or strength. I hereby seize all lands not directly necessary for the maintenance of Avalon's population."

Then he spoke to the men that held her. "See that she arrives in that Circle quickly."

"But why this?" Nimue blurted.

He ran his hand through his hair and looked at Morgan as he answered. "My kin. You are my own blood. And even you -- " His voice broke and he turned away. In a moment he regained control and said with steel-edged words. "I have no blood heritage." Briefly, a flash of horrible loneliness filled his eyes.

"I am not your enemy," Morgan insisted. "They are." She nodded towards the crowd of monks. "They will banish us all. I will go to Avalon and stay there happily. And I will pray to the gods that you will someday know I have never been against you...only those that are using you."

Arthur turned away from her then and signalled his men. Bedwyr and the other man started to take her away, but as they passed Accolon's body, Bedwyr stopped to allow her a farewell.

Rising from the kiss she had given Accolon, Morgan called back to her brother. "Arthur, if you ever need to touch the centre in yourself...the part that is truly you...you'll need both halves of the circle. Remember that I can help."

As the men pulled her along, Taliesin took her hand and squeezed it.

Arthur made no move at all.

return   to the quenching waters of Avalon   released her
and Morgan   her emptiness now   a loss of pain
sought the greater peace   within her healing prison
freed from the distractions   of a world she no longer
knew   she became a woman of the past   eternally renewed

Elder

Tree of Doom

The years had been kind to Taliesin. His hair had only faded with time, washed to the colour of sand. And his face was now decorated with the delicate etchings of experience. Carefully he stepped into the boat as Morgan held out her hand to him. He took it, pressing her fingers to his lips, and knelt beside Arthur on the flowers. Then he bent to kiss his dead King's mouth, and breaking with a sob he rested his forehead on the silent chest. Morgan curled a strand of Taliesin's hair between her fingers.

The ferryman began once more to pole away from the shore, the boat slipping silently through the black water, and the bard raised his head to speak.

Still cradling her brother on her lap, she watched Taliesin struggle through his grief. Her own eyes filled, tears sliding down her cheeks.

Gently, like a breeze in the grass, he spoke. "On the way here, he had us stop. At another lake. Bedwyr worried that if we tarried, we would not make it here...on time."

Morgan touched the bloodied bandage.

"He had us stop," Taliesin went on. "He made us lead the horses into the water as far as they would go. Then he took his sword." Taliesin touched Morgan's arm and she looked into his eyes.

"The abbeys' sword, Morgan. Without hesitation, he dropped it into the lake."

Morgan studied the flecks of sun riding on the water, and remembered the way that sword had gleamed with fire. "Did he say why?"

Taliesin shook his head. After a moment, Taliesin continued, "I don't think it meant anything to him anymore, Morgan. He knew the end had come. Everyone had turned against him. He'd lost his popularity. His foreign allies so obviously ruled him, especially in these last years, that no one believed him to be the promised saviour of Britain anymore. Even his wife deserted him. Fell in love with a real hero, people say. One of his own men."

Taliesin took Arthur's still hand in his. "No one needed him anymore."

She clutched at Taliesin's arm. "How did this happen?"

The bard answered only for the last, fatal wound. "Mordred. When he came looking for his father, Arthur was lonely enough to take him in."

"Yes," she commented softly. She had heard.

Taliesin continued. "While Arthur was on a diplomatic visit in Gaul, Mordred tried to seize power here. Usurp his father. And Kei, remember him? He rode with Mordred. When Arthur returned there was a battle at Camlann. Mordred struck the final blow just before he fell himself."

The bard was silent for a moment, staring unfocussed at what lay ahead. The cheerful warble of birds filled the air. Then he added softly, "Morgan...Owein also fought on Mordred's side. With his father's death last year, he took his own lead."

Morgan felt her own breath freeze inside her.

Taliesin shook his head. "He wasn't hurt."

The chill stayed.

"It doesn't mean Merlin was right."

"No?" The cold was spreading through her now, like death itself.

The bard took her hand. "No. If you breed hatred and suspicion, you get hatred and suspicion. Mordred was suckled on the knowledge that his father wanted him dead. And Owein lost you because of it."

The cold retreated.

"At the end, then," Morgan asked slowly, "Arthur finally knew he'd been used? Always used by someone or something. Never allowed to be his own man..."

Sadly, Taliesin looked down and answered, "I would say so." He slipped his hand from Arthur's and drew back his cloak. For the first time, at least in Morgan's memory, he was wearing a scabbard.

"Before we left to bring him here," he began, drawing the sword out, "he sent me back to Caer Leon to retrieve this. Mordred's men still held the Caer, but a bard's status...well. They let me pass."

He held the sword out across both his hands and Morgan caught her breath. It was Lile's sword, fashioned by Corb for Arthur so many years ago. Twenty-three. Was it? Yes. Taliesin placed it down on the flowers.

It was the message from Arthur she had always wanted.

Taliesin's words tugged her away from her thoughts. "He wanted a Briton funeral, Morgan. A Briton one."

She felt the pull of Taliesin's eyes and met them.

"I suppose this," he indicated the sword, "is to be buried with him."

"No," Morgan smiled, considering how to explain something that had just become clear to her. "I think he'd rather it found a home too."

With a puzzled look, Taliesin sat back on the flowers, running some petals through his fingers, listening carefully.

"Arthur," she began, "wanted both swords, wanted both of them and both of us to witness his passing. He wanted to find his centre, Tay. To be whole at the end. And to do that he needed both halves - Briton and Christian.

"All this time," she continued, "I've wanted him to come for his *true* heritage, as though he only had one true half. I was wrong. I didn't see until now that he needed both. And neither, I think, did you.

"You and I didn't see then that we are at the middle of things, The middle is a time of change, and we've lived our whole lives there. But we did not understand that change was right. Inevitable. When I saw things dissolve around me, I clung to the old ways. You, because this time of change offered you no place, reached for the new. Neither of us was wrong, there. But we did not truly understand what as Britons has always been taught to us. And what is still being taught: Alpha-Omega, it's called now. In every end a beginning, and in every beginning an end. It's the way the gods...all the gods...planned things."

Eyes bright and sweet, Taliesin smiled at her.

She looked back down at her brother. "Arthur knew that too, finally. He came back here, to the old ways...bringing you. Making sure both old and new songs would be sung. Between you and me, between the two swords, we represent the beginning and the end."

She lifted Lile's sword up from the petals and, opening her hand, gently dropped it over the side of the boat. It sliced through the water without a ripple, and disappeared in less than a breath.

Then she turned back to her friend. "And between us...Arthur will always exist."

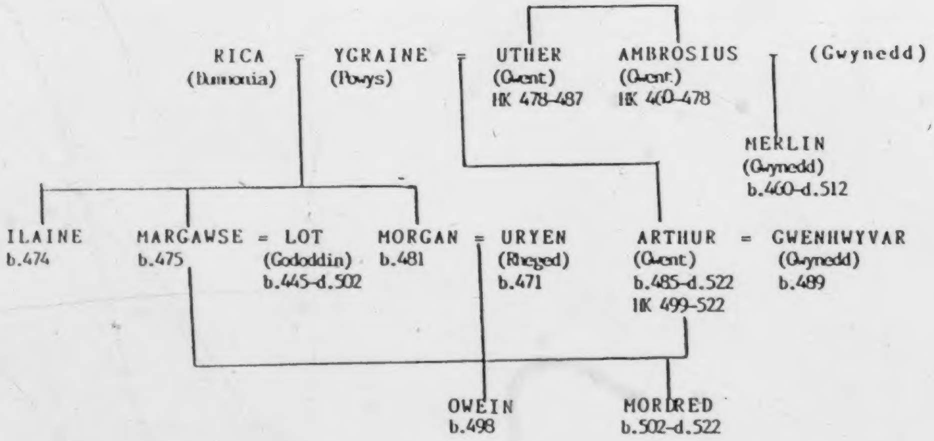
Silence wrapped itself comfortably around them and they sat, lulled by the soft rise and fall of the boat.

The ferry would reach Avalon's shores very soon. Before they left the water, Morgan wanted Taliesin to sing. She reached for his hand and urged, "Sing another song for him."

And smiling, Taliesin began in the new way.

may I receive from Christ that I may not be sad
in good or evil fortune   a share of his mercy
in the land of glory   life everlasting

The End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MERLIN
(Gwynedd)
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ILAINE
b.474
MARGAWSE
b.475
LOT
(Gododdin)
b.445-d.502
MORGAN
b.481
URYEN
(Rheged)
b.471
ARTHUR
(Gwent)
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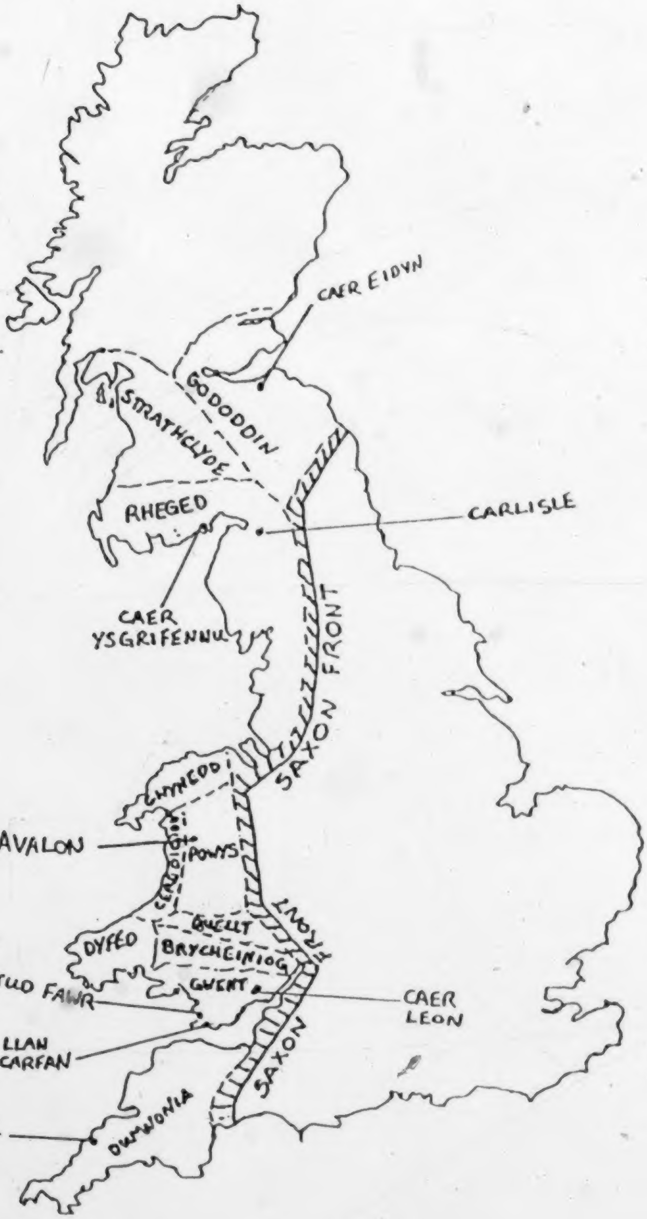
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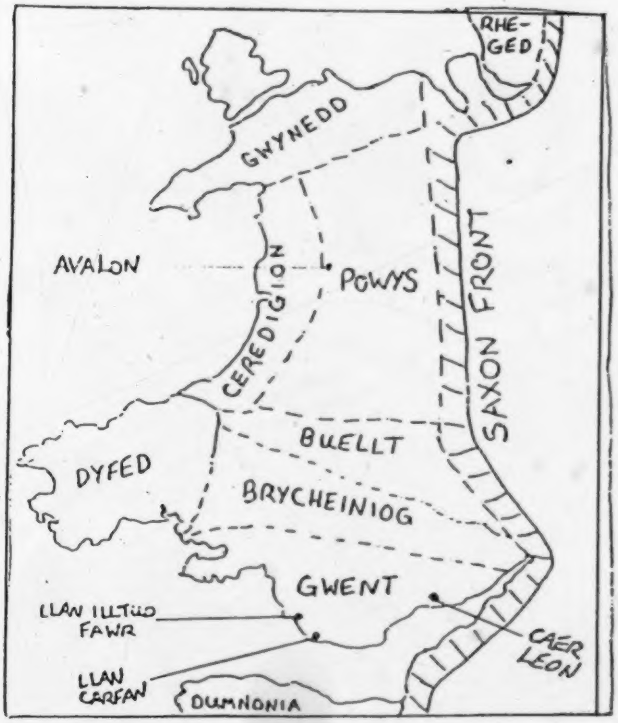
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CAER LEON
LLAN CARFAN
DUMNONIA

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